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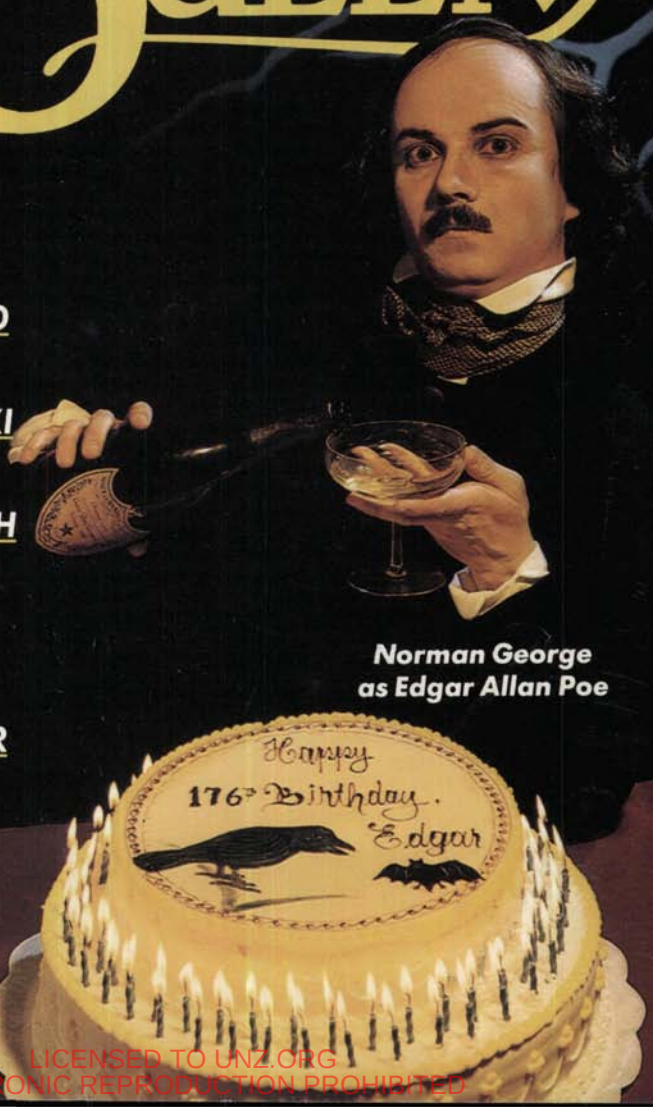

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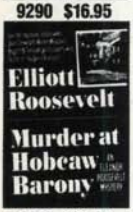

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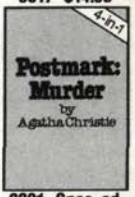

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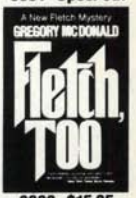

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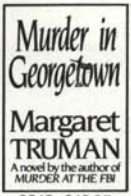

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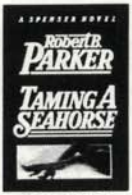

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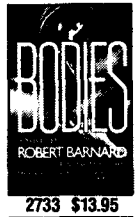

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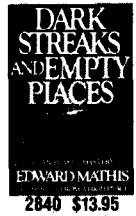

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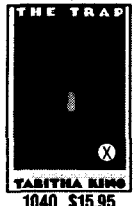

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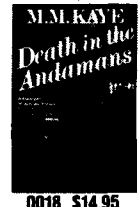

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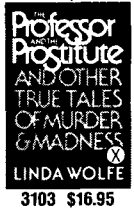

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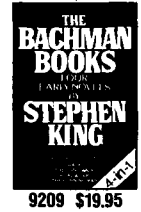

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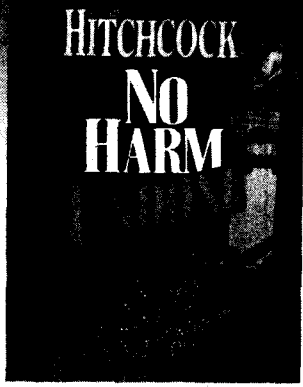

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NORMAN GEORGE
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a *NEW* short story by

JEAN POTTS

"Have you talked to Mother lately?" Roger asked.

"She called this morning," Jennie said. "Sounding very chipper. She's found somebody to paint the—"

"I know. A guy named Tony. Carol and Lydia ran into the two of them and Mother introduced him as a school friend of mine. Which he definitely is not . . ."

TWO ON THE ISLE

by JEAN POTTS

Here he was again, the same young man strolling past the outdoor cafe where Vivian sat sipping her martini. Not much of it left, and there was not going to be another. Absolutely not. That was the rule she had laid down for herself, and that was how it was going to be.

The young man looked a bit like her husband—if memory served. It was so many years since his death that his image tended to blur with whose who followed. No lack of them. Quite the contrary, according to certain members of her family—her son for one, and her son-in-law for another. Well, they couldn't complain on that score nowadays.

This time the young man smiled at her. She smiled back. After all, why not? A natural human response.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" he said.

"Perfect." She tilted her head, smiling again, not flirtatiously. Of course not, she must be twice his age. Though maybe not. You couldn't be sure with these fair-haired choirboy types.

He took a tentative step toward her. "I wonder, would you mind if I joined you? Unless you have other plans—"

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A flattering thought. And he looked so wistful standing there with the last rays of the sun outlining his head like a halo. "All right," she said. "For a little while."

"I'm Tony." Beaming, he slid into the chair opposite her. "And you're?"

"Vivian."

"Nice name. Suits you. Vivian. I was afraid you'd get the wrong idea. But that smile of yours, well, I couldn't resist it."

His frankly admiring gaze brought back the pleasurable quickening of pulse that was always part of a new encounter. Sometimes the best part: things could go flat, even with a promising prospect like Tony. A very engaging young man—fresh, open face, lively blue eyes, slim build, casual clothes. She decided he looked less like her husband than like Al, one among others she could have married, and possibly would have if somebody else hadn't come along to distract her.

Meanwhile, the waiter was hovering and Tony was saying, "A martini for the lady, right? Then make it two."

So much for her one-drink rule. But now that she had Tony to keep her company, another drink was perfectly legitimate, not to say advisable in case of a fizzle.

She needn't have worried. By the time the drinks arrived they had discovered they were both hooked on the theater—Tony as an aspiring playwright, Vivian as the stagestruck girl she had been back in her drama-school days before she got sidetracked into marriage and motherhood. Later on there was the playwriting course she had taken. (At one time or another she had dabbled in painting, wood sculpture, and meditation.) While nothing much had come of that, either, she could be intelligent about Tony's problem with Act 2. He was hoping to polish off his work-in-progress by the end of summer in spite of two paint jobs he had lined up for August. That was how he earned a living, as a free-lance decorator and all-purpose handyman.

Vivian pricked up her ears at this. Her kitchen and bathroom were in dire need of a fresh coat of paint, and the living-room windows didn't work right. But she held off asking if Tony might be interested until they were well into the next martini.

He jumped at the chance. This very evening he could walk her home for a preliminary look at what was needed—how about it?

No sooner said than done. Well, not quite—with the arrival of the check he discovered to his acute embarrassment that he had come

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off without his charge card. But she had hers, so it was all right: they set off arm in arm, in a glow of euphoria at the luck that had brought them together. And what a balmy evening—a gentle breeze, half a moon melting over Third Avenue, the trees in full leaf—perfect.

Except that in the lobby of Vivian's apartment house they met up with Cousin Lydia, whose apartment was just down the hall from Vivian's. Poor Lydia, such a good old soldier. She and Vivian had grown up together and remained close, not only as neighbors here but as joint owners of the Long Island house bequeathed them by their parents. What complicated the awkwardness of meeting Lydia tonight was that she was accompanied by her niece Carol, who was openly, spitefully, critical of Vivian's life style, and who, sure enough, was giving Tony one of her fishy-eyed looks.

"Lydia dear! And Carol! How nice to see you!" Vivian cried, overdoing it, as usual when she was nervous. "Where are you off to? The movies? Then don't let me keep you—" But they remained firmly planted, Lydia on her elephant legs, Carol on her bird ones, waiting to be introduced. Vivian reeled off their names and rushed on. "Tony's a friend of Roger's, they were in school together. We just happened to meet. So lucky, because Tony's a decorator and you know how long I've been looking for someone to paint my kitchen."

Lydia would buy her version, but not Carol. When Vivian and Tony finally took themselves off, her fishy-eyed look was still there, plus—another of her specialties—a knowing little smirk.

"Poor Lydia," Vivian explained. "A bit stuffy, but such a dear, really—the best-hearted soul in the world. Carol—well, that's another story. Let's skip it for now."

Tony didn't ask who Roger was, so what was the point in telling him? The fact that Tony could be passed off as a contemporary of her son Roger was something else she preferred to skip for now.

A week later Roger called his sister Jennie out in New Jersey. "I know you think I worry too much," he began as so often before, "but—"

"Shut up," said Jennie, who did think so. "Not you, Roger, I was talking to the kids. Wait a minute till I get them straightened out. —Now,then, 'but'what?"

She already had a pretty good idea. Roger's worries followed an either/or pattern. The either being Peg, his wife—or ex-wife, whatever you called it when a couple were separated—and the other being—

"Have you talked to Mother lately?" he asked.

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"She called this morning. Sounded very chipper. She's found somebody to paint the—"

"I know. I just talked to her. A guy named Tony. Did she tell you he's an old school friend of mine?"

"What? No. One of her neighbors recommended him."

"She told me that, too. But it's not the way I heard it from Carol. She's met this fellow Tony—she and Lydia ran into the two of them—and Mother introduced him as a school friend of mine. Which he definitely is not. Here we go again, Jennie, another one of her bar pickups. And just when it looks like Peg and I might get together again— At least she's agreed to talk it over next weekend. But once she hears about this Tony—"

"You don't have to tell her," Jennie broke in.

"I certainly don't. Not with Carol on hand to spread the word. You know what that will do to my chances with Peg."

Yes, Jennie knew. She had been present last Christmas at Peg's family dinner party, a really nice party until Mother showed up, more than an hour late, far from sober, and spoiling for a fight. It wasn't the first such episode, but it was the worst, and for Peg it was the end. When her parents left the next day for their home in Boston, she went with them.

"I mean it, Jennie, I'm fed up. Peg's right, I ought to just break loose from Mother. Go my way and let her go hers. Only—"

"Only there's the money." Jennie was upset enough to turn waspish. "You don't want to lose out on her money."

"That's part of it, sure." One thing about Roger, he was honest. "The same as it is for you and Mike." Very honest. And sometimes right on target. She and Mike were always dreaming up different ways of using the share of Mother's estate that would someday be theirs. There might not be a whole lot left, but the Long Island house she owned jointly with Cousin Lydia was worth a small fortune and would bring a tidy sum, even allowing for a decline in today's prices.

Roger was going on. "Did she tell you she's planning to take Tony out to the Long Island house this summer and install him there as resident all-purpose handyman? The Great American Playright doubling as Mr. Fixit. What he really is, of course, is a manipulator, and she's too ga-ga about him to see it."

His bitterness shocked Jennie. Always before, his exasperation with Mother had been tempered by his affection for her. From childhood on, they had taken her as she was, an unorthodox kind of mother but a charming one. In recent years, Jennie—and Roger,

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until now—had fallen into the habit of thinking of themselves as parents, and Mother as child. Problem child, yes—often wayward, but never unloved.

"Don't be so hard on her, Roger. It's just that she can't face getting old, losing her looks."

"You can make allowances for her. Not me. Not any more. You'd feel different if she loused up your marriage the way she has mine. It could happen to you and Mike, you know."

"I don't know anything of the kind," Jennie said sharply. "Just because she and Mike have their differences—"

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't have." But then she relented. "All right. I'll see what I can do with her. Try not to worry. You could just be borrowing trouble."

But after they hung up, she sat on at the breakfast table, too beat even to cry. There was dinner to start. From the living room came a thud and a bloodthirsty yell, signifying that the kids were once more locked in mortal combat. Mike was sure to blow his top over this latest word on Tony—not that she took Roger's nonsense seriously, not for one single minute.

Mother . . .

Too much. It was all too much.

For the past week, Tony had been fully occupied with Vivian. Now it was time he touched home base—for one thing, to pick up some clothes—home base being the grubby SoHo apartment he shared with Dennis, a frequently "at liberty" actor who filled in the gaps as a waiter. Absences on both sides were taken in stride. When Tony bounced in, Dennis looked up from his copy of *Variety* and took another sip of coffee. "Hey there," he said. "How goes it?"

"Terrific. Wait till you hear."

"Aha. Your play's done and Joe Papp has snapped it up."

"Not yet, but I'm working on it. Thank God for Vivian's tape recorder, it's so much easier talking into it instead of typing. Besides, I can hear how it sounds, then Viv plays it back and tapes her reactions. She's a whiz at spotting what's wrong and how to fix it." He spread his arms wide in jubilation. "Dennis, my boy, you see before you what may well be the luckiest man in town."

"A toast!" Dennis hoisted his coffee cup. "To Vivian and her magic tape recorder. By the way, who is Vivian?"

"That's what I'm telling you." And Tony launched into the details

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of his chance—well, more or less chance—encounter with Vivian, and a somewhat abridged version of its aftermath: the busy, boozy, profitable, and pleasant week just past. "At first she said just the kitchen and bath, but now she's decided I might as well do the whole place. Her way of contributing to the career of a struggling, deserving playwright. Me. Plus more to come, like a couple of weeks at this summer place of hers on Long Island. Admit it, Dennis—am I or am I not the luckiest man in town?"

"You could be," acknowledged Dennis. "Provided you don't push things too far. I recall—"

"Past history. This time it's different. Vivian, the setup, everything. A whole new ballgame."

Dennis nodded thoughtfully. Then he cleared his throat and asked, "How old is Vivian?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I was just wondering. You do seem to prefer older women. I mean, up until now."

"Okay, I suppose she'd be classed as an older woman. Not that she looks it—she must have been a stunner in her day. And believe me, she doesn't act it. The point is—" He paused and added, with a note of surprise in his voice, "I like Viv. I really like her."

"All the more reason to watch your step." Dennis stood up and stretched. "Well, there it is. My last word on the subject."

There wasn't time for more talk. Dennis was due at the steak joint. Still hanging in there, pinning his hopes on "a couple of things pending" out on the horizon.

"One break, that's all it takes." Tony held up his crossed fingers.

So did Dennis, who was already at the door. "Keep in touch, Tony. And don't forget to watch it."

The phone was ringing when Vivian came back from the liquor store. Jennie—sounding stern. "Mother, there's something I have to talk to you about. Not over the phone. I'll be coming into the city today and I can stop by the apartment or meet you anywhere you say."

"Today? I'm terribly sorry, dear, I'd love to see you, but I can't possibly make it today." It was true enough, the reason being that she and Tony were going out to dinner to celebrate the anniversary of their first meeting two weeks ago. "Oh, what a shame, darling! I simply can't get out of this appointment. Besides, the place is utter chaos, what with the painting."

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"Well, then, how about tomorrow? Surely you can get away for an hour or so."

"Of course. I've had you on my mind. Roger and I had such a nice chat the other day. Maybe he told you."

"He did. He's worried that Peg may change her mind about seeing him next weekend. If you can make it tomorrow—"

"Poor Roger, such a worrywart. It's just that I'm not sure about tomorrow. Maybe the end of the week?"

Jennie sighed audibly. "All right. Friday."

"I'll call you later, just to confirm—"

"No more hedging, Mother. Friday for sure. When and where?"

"Hedging! Honestly, you do get the strangest ideas," said Vivian. "Friday evening, then—about eight-thirty? And I think here, if you don't mind the chaos." Tony would have to make himself scarce, but only for an hour or two. She might as well get the session with Jennie over with. It would be another tiresome hassle—this time some of it her own fault. She couldn't think what had possessed her, blurting out her plans to Roger—who had gone into one of his twitches and alerted Jennie, who was now stuck with the job of Straightening Mother Out.

They were dears, both of them, Vivian thought, why couldn't they leave her alone? For decades now she had spent part of every summer with Lydia at the Long Island house. (Such a bore.) Surely this year she was entitled to a couple of weeks there with Tony. It was so deliciously appropriate. The name of his play was *Two on the Isle* and the setting was no other than Long Island! And it made sense to appoint him caretaker/tenant with all the odd jobs to be done—it was a practical arrangement all around. Besides, what a fine gesture it would be—her contribution to the career of a talented playwright.

Her thoughts settled happily on what to wear for the gala evening ahead. Nothing too dressy—her diamond earrings would provide enough of a festive touch.

Except that they weren't where they ought to be, in her jewelry case. It gave her quite a jolt at first. But she had a trick, especially after a party, of tucking money or bits of jewelry away, sometimes in the most unlikely places. These very earrings had once turned up in the paper-clip compartment of her desk drawer. They would surface again eventually. In the meantime, tomorrow, her pearls would serve.

By the time Tony came back from SoHo she had mixed the martinis and forgotten the whole trifling incident . . .

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"Friday!" said Mike. "But that's the night we're going to the theater!"

"Oh, my." Jennie put her hands up to her face and stared back at him, stricken. "I forgot. I completely forgot. But I can't get out of it, Mike. Mother—"

"Mother! She comes first, of course. Mother. Roger. The kids. Me, I'm at the bottom of the list."

"That's not true," she began. But he was already storming off down the hall, to reappear a moment later with the tickets. They had been there for more than a month, stuck in the mirror by Jennie herself. A special treat. One of their rare nights out.

He stood over her, waving them at her.

"It's my fault, not Mother's," she said shakily "You could still go—"

"And a grand time I'd have, wouldn't I, without you? Don't tell me it's not her fault. Look at the way she's bitched up Roger's marriage. She's not going to do it to mine."

"It's mine, too," Jennie said in a small voice.

"The point is, you won't get anywhere talking to her on Friday. All she cares about is this latest gigolo of hers."

"He's not a gigolo!"

"No? Who do you think is paying for the booze and everything else? Plus the paint job, and the Long Island house . . . He could clean her out of every cent she's got. She's fool enough to let him."

"Now that's enough." Jennie stood up, fire in her eye. "Calling my mother a fool, making her out to be a tramp! —Don't you dare!" she added, as he reached out to grab her arm.

He let his hand drop and for a moment they stood glaring at each other.

"So that's how it is," he said bitterly. "The same old story. She comes first." His eyes shifted to the theater tickets in his hand.

"Mike!" she whispered, but it didn't stop him. Methodically, he tore the tickets up, opened his hands, and let the bits flutter to the floor.

Then, in heavy silence, he turned and headed up the stairs.

They were having one of their evenings together: dinner at Aunt Lydia's apartment—Carol's cubbyhole of a residence-club room had no kitchen privileges—followed by a trip to the neighborhood movie house.

Not that they enjoyed each other's company that much. Lydia

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invited her niece out of a sense of duty and for want of anything better to do. Carol, obsessed with money as she was, accepted because it was a free meal—also, she had her eye on Lydia's share of the Long Island house, which presumably would someday be hers. In her experience you didn't Get Ahead without Looking Ahead. She was already supervisor of the secretarial service where she had started out as a typist. Her goal was to own the business and she aimed to reach it before her thirty-fifth birthday two years from now. She wasn't going to wind up like Aunt Lydia, who, after putting in forty-odd years at her insurance-company job without ever rising above the clerical level, was slated for mandatory retirement next spring.

Carol, having wolfed down her helping of the tuna casserole Lydia had scarcely begun, lit a cigarette and hunched forward like a scrawny, sharp-eyed bird. "I don't suppose you've seen Vivian," she said.

"Not to talk to, no. She's so busy with the painting."

"He's certainly taking long enough, this Tony. I know he's doing the whole place, but even so."

"He's fixing the windows, too. And doing other odd jobs."

"That's one way of putting it," Carol said, and smirked. "Who does she think she's kidding? Trying to pass him off as a school friend of Roger's!"

"How do you know he isn't? He could be."

"Not according to Roger."

"You told Roger?" Lydia laid down her fork. "Carol, you know what a worrier he is. He has only your description to go on. Maybe if he saw Tony himself—"

"Oh, come on, Aunt Lydia. She picked him up in a bar. Why not admit it? You talk as if she was some kind of an angel."

"I do not," Lydia said firmly. "Vivian has her faults, I've never denied it. But when I think of all she's done for me. When I had my operation—"

"You've told me. She lent you money. Came to see you every day. Big deal. How about all you've done for her? Babysitting with her kids while she was out partying—you practically raised them. Nursing her through her hangovers. Same thing at the Long Island place. Your so-called vacations." She darted a sly glance at Lydia. "Will you be going out together this summer?"

"Well, of course. We always do."

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"I know. That's what I told Roger when he came out with this idea of his."

Lydia picked up her fork. Laid it down again. "What idea? What are you talking about?"

"Well—he says Vivian's cooking up some plan with Tony instead of with you for this summer. I don't know if there's anything to it—"

"There certainly is not. We've been going out there ever since we were kids. That's where we've both spent the summers, our two families . . ." They had grown up together, more like sisters than cousins, Vivian the charmer, never without a swarm of boy friends buzzing around, and ugly duckling Lydia, never with even one. All the same, happy days. And no less so now. "We have such a good time, just the two of us. Vivian's wonderful company, you know. And she loves the place as much as I do. That's something else she's done for me, she's always paid the taxes. Most of the upkeep, too. All these years, when I should have been paying my half—"

"Why shouldn't she? She has plenty of money." And—this was the galling part—without ever having to work for a penny of it. With Vivian it was simply a matter of finding a well heeled husband. Hers had died young, leaving his widow and children well provided for. There was also the legacy from her parents—half of the Long Island place. Carol's attention was focused on that. "So it's really more Vivian's house than yours," she said thoughtfully.

But Aunt Lydia was talking, too, and didn't hear. "I'm thinking of moving out there when I retire."

"You mean all year round? Give up your apartment?"

"I'm going to have to cut back somewhere, and rent's my biggest expense."

"But you'd have other expenses—a car, to name one. You can't go on using that old wreck of yours much longer. And Vivian's more than half owner, what if she—" Carol peered at her aunt. "I didn't mention Roger's other worry. Apparently Vivian hinted she might 'rent' the house to Tony in return for doing odd jobs around the place. That would make a pretty awkward situation for you, wouldn't it?" Then, as Lydia got to her feet and lumbered toward the kitchen, plate in hand, Carol cried, "But you haven't finished your dinner! I didn't mean to upset you, Aunt Lydia—after all, it's none of my business."

But eventually it would be her business. Unless something happened to wreck her expectations—like Tony winding up as a permanent tenant in the house. If Vivian went through with her plans,

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could Lydia be trusted to hang onto the only thing she owned that was worth inheriting?

Carol thought not. "We have such a good time, just the two of us." No, the presence of someone else, anyone else, would destroy the charm of the place for Lydia, and most likely she would just let go, sell out her share—to Vivian, the first bidder, whoever—and live on the proceeds until they ran out or she died, whichever came first. In either case, Carol could kiss her inheritance goodbye.

It all depended on Vivian, and there was simply no way of predicting what that butterfly might do. She must be stopped from setting off disaster. Somehow, someone must stop her.

From the kitchen door where she stood—thick, ungainly, her face flushed and blotchy—Aunt Lydia burst out, "You don't understand Vivian or you'd know—"

Carol went to her and made soothing noises, and in due time drew from Lydia a tremulous smile of forgiveness. A good omen. Carol's answering smile was confident.

"I'm not so sure it would help," Roger said when Mike had come out with what was on his mind—which he did promptly, as soon as they were settled at the bar, and bluntly as was his style. "Mother already knows how I feel, so what's the use of telling her again?"

"It beats doing nothing." Mike's voice took on an edge—they weren't big on rapport, Roger and he. "Jennie needs a little moral support. I can't give it. Vivian's got no use for me, never has had. She might listen to you."

"Maybe. Then again, maybe not." The phrase was one of Roger's favorites. "It's pretty short notice, you know."

"Now, look. Jennie won't be getting to Vivian's place until eight-thirty. Three hours from now. That's short notice? It's your problem, too, Roger, not just Jennie's."

"I realize that." Roger tightened up, decidedly huffy. "May I ask if this is her idea?"

"No, it's not. She'd raise hell with me if she knew I'd asked you. So let her think you decided on your own. If you go, that is."

Roger's face was now creased with anxious puckers. "I wouldn't hesitate, except I'm expecting a call from Peg. To set up a date."

"Won't she try again if she doesn't get you? Or how about if you call her?"

Roger was silent for a moment. Then: "The thing is, she gets annoyed if I call her too often."

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"Holy mother. You mean you're going to leave Jennie to go it alone just because you're scared to call your wife?"

"I haven't said I wouldn't go," Roger pointed out nervously.

"You haven't said you would, either."

"If Peg calls early enough. About seven, she said. So maybe—"

Then again, maybe not. Mike cajoled, he bullied, he reasoned, but there was no budging his brother-in-law off the fence. Soon after he was gone, Mike left, too. Out on the street, he decided to give Jennie a ring. But by the time he found a phone booth in working order, it was too late—the babysitter reported that Jennie had just left. Might as well be drunk as the way I am, he thought, and headed for the nearest bar.

Before she caught the bus into Manhattan, Jennie, too, tried, and failed, to reach Mike. He had told her—icily polite, as usual after a quarrel—that he would be working late. Instead, he had left on the dot of five. The source of this information was the switchboard girl. Which meant that his secretary, who usually stayed until five-thirty, had also left early.

A very attractive blonde, Mike's secretary.

There was no answer when she rang Mother's bell. The intercom must be on the blink again. It was against this and other eventualities that Jennie always carried her set of keys. No answer upstairs, either. She let herself into the long, dusky, empty-feeling hall, pausing there, remembering other promises Mother had failed to keep, especially those, like this one, made under pressure. But remembering, too, the statistics about how most accidents happen at home.

She made a quick check of the living room, bedroom, and bath. That left the kitchen, at the opposite end of the hall.

Mother lay sprawled on her back in front of the cupboard. Such a small, fragile figure in her long, frilly housecoat and her high-heeled mules. Frivolous things, and treacherous. She might easily have fallen because of them. But then Jennie took those few last steps that brought her close enough to see Mother's battered head, the dent in her temple, the gin bottle lying on its side on the floor.

There was no breath left in Jennie to scream. After a series of childish whimpers, she managed to call the police. A few moments after she hung up, the phone rang, and when she heard the voice at the other end of the line she broke down.

"Mike—oh, Mike, it's Mother. She's— Please—"

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"I'll be right there, love," said Mike.

He was as good as his word. Right there he was, on the heels of the police . . .

Farther downtown, on a bench in the scruffy little park where he had collapsed, Tony huddled, once more trembling uncontrollably. It wasn't a nightmare—it had really happened, he was in deep, deep trouble.

There was still a chance, though, if he could make it to his apartment. It was the first place they'd check, but if he didn't get there and retrieve the diamond earrings he didn't have a prayer. To the police, the earrings would be the clincher in the case against him. To Tony, they were the only way in sight of raising the cash he needed for a getaway.

Darkness had fallen. It must be hours since he fled from Vivian's apartment. He had arrived there—having worked all afternoon at one of his other paint jobs—punctually at seven. This would give them time for a drink together before her daughter showed up. A heart-to-heart session, Vivian had explained. He did understand, didn't he? He could meet Jennie another time.

Only four blocks—they had to be covered, those four blocks—and out of desperation he found the strength, even managing to keep an eye out for the police.

No sign of them. And the apartment was empty, as he had hoped. He was in no shape to meet up with anyone, including Dennis—who, good buddy that he was, would do his best. But it wouldn't be enough. This time if they caught up with him he was done for.

The feel of the earrings in his hand brought enough of a lift to his confidence so that he took a little extra time to change from his work clothes into slacks, a clean shirt, and jacket.

They were waiting for him out on the street—two plainclothesmen who moved in from either side, cutting off his retreat. Not that he tried that or anything else in the way of resistance. He simply caved in, shuddering again, and sobbing: "I didn't do it—I never would. I liked Viv, I really liked her . . ."

Roger arrived just as they were removing Mother's body. Whatever the police had told him over the phone, they had not prepared him for the truth. Grey-faced, he crumpled into the nearest chair. His report on how and where he had spent the early-evening hours came haltingly, as if both his mind and tongue were benumbed. He paused longest of all over the question of who, if anyone, had been

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with him. Jennie caught the glance that passed between him and Mike. Almost as if a message were being sent and received.

At last he said: "Nobody. I was home, waiting for my wife to phone, from about six-thirty on. I worked late at the office."

Mike had used the same phrase in accounting for his evening. But Jennie now remembered, with a jolt, the switchboard girl's report: "Sorry. He left on the dot of five." All right. Was she going to take the word of a scatterbrained girl against that of her husband?

He had been nothing if not frank about other points—how many drinks (plenty) and at which bars (none where he was a regular). And he made no bones about the antagonism between himself and Mother. "She thought I wasn't good enough for Jennie—I thought the same of her," was how he summed it up.

Whereas Roger rather glossed over his bitterness at Mother's life style. As for this evening, he had no more corroboration than Mike for his version of how he had spent it. That didn't mean either of them was lying. Only that either or both could be.

But by this time it was clear—even to Jennie, in her dazed state—that the police had shifted their sights from the family members, including Lydia and Carol, and were zeroing in on Tony as their prime suspect. Lydia was not in her apartment down the hall. According to Carol, she had gone out to the Long Island house for the weekend and so far no one had been able to reach her by phone. Carol also confirmed that the snapshot they showed her was of the man Mother had introduced to them as Tony. They had shown it to Jennie, too—a nice-looking young fellow with a pleasant open face—without explaining how they happened to have it.

The intensive, city-wide search for Tony now under way was triggered by Mother's next-door neighbor, who came forward with her story: she had seen "the painter fellow" leaving the apartment at about seven o'clock, "in a tearing hurry, very upset."

The technical experts had already cleared out. The bustle was easing off. Before the police left, the word came through: Tony was being held for questioning, and when apprehended was found to be in possession of a pair of diamond earrings very like those belonging to Mother. Which should have been in her jewel box but were not, as Jennie had discovered earlier when she was asked to try to determine if any valuables were missing.

Furthermore, this was not his first brush with the law. It seemed that he specialized in friendships with women older than himself, unattached and fairly affluent women who were happy on occasion

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to help him out financially. Except for Mother's predecessor, a widow who had accused him of stealing some of her jewelry and then backed down and dropped the charges, though the episode was still on the record.

No wonder the police were convinced of his guilt. Mother, having discovered the theft of her earrings, must have threatened to report him, and Tony—in a panic because of his record—had snatched up the gin bottle, the first weapon that came to hand.

They went to Roger's apartment for what was left of the night. No need to make the trip back to Jersey—early on, Mike had arranged with his sister to take charge of the kids.

They sat in the living room, Jennie and Mike side by side on the couch, Roger huddled so close on the hassock in front of them that his knees touched Jennie's. Beside him on the floor was the tape recorder that had stood on Mother's kitchen table.

"They said it was okay for me to take it. She borrowed it from me a couple of months ago for one of her courses and I'm going to need it—I have this presentation coming up." He broke off and buried his head in his hands as if suddenly struck by the trivialities that were already closing in on him. After a while he said, "I suppose we ought to go to bed."

Jennie supposed so, too. But neither of them moved. They might have sat on indefinitely if Mike hadn't pulled Jennie to her feet—"All right, here we go"—and piloted her toward the bedroom. Roger watched forlornly, then trailed off to the den to stretch out on the daybed there.

Even with the comfort of Mike's arms enfolding her, Jennie could not sleep. Like a defective machine spinning its wheels, her mind ground on and on—a jumble of images, disconnected bits, and pieces of conversations she was powerless to shut off. She stirred cautiously in case Mike had dozed off, but he was instantly alert. "Shall I get you another tranquilizer?"

"No," she whispered, "I'll be all right." Then, "Mike, you said you worked late tonight. But I called the office a little after five. I was told you'd already left."

"Oh. Well, the fact is that Roger and I—" That was as far as he got. From the living room came a thud of feet, followed by a burst of frantic rapping on the bedroom door. Mike leaped up to open it. "What's going on?"

Roger stood there wild-eyed, and at first speechless. His chin

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bobbed up and down as if it were unhinged. Finally he said, "Listen. You have to— I was just— It's all there—"

"All what?" Mike asked. "Where?"

"On the tape!" Roger said. "It was running. The whole time. Come on. Listen for yourself." He headed back to the den. On the desk was the tape recorder. Roger bent over it, pushing buttons, turning knobs. And producing only a series of whirs and clicks.

Then the machine reproduced a pleasant masculine voice. "Eric: 'If that's how you want it.' Sheila remains with her back to him. Long pause. She nods. Exit Eric. Curtain. Hallelujah! Hear that, Viv? Curtain!"

"Tony," explained Roger. "This play of his. He'd dictate a scene, then she'd play it back and say what she thought."

Sure enough, here was Mother's voice, bubbling with excitement: "Tony darling, it's terrific—exactly right. Sheila doesn't have to say a word, she just nods." The sound of the door buzzer broke into this effusion. Then there were crackling sounds and the clack of her heels down the hall. Finally—all there on the tape which she had left running—the other voice.

It, too, was familiar—slightly lower than Mother's and without her dramatics. A purposeful voice that stayed on the same track in spite of the diversionary tactics that usually worked so well for Mother. But this time the conversation, friendly at first, grew more and more heated, eventually flaring into open battle. At times they both talked at once, an unintelligible snarl of sound, at other times their words shot out distinct as bullets—the other voice saying, "But you can't! You have no right!" and Mother answering, "What do you mean, no right? It's half mine—I'll do as I please!" She even laughed a little, as if it were all too ridiculous. If only she hadn't done that, thought Jennie, if only she had seen how deadly serious it was. But she had remained blithely unaware, right up to the very end. Her last word was a whispered, incredulous "No" that turned into a choked-off cry.

The recorder whirred on, then gave a final click.

Roger swallowed. "I still can't believe it. Tony's the logical one. How could it *not* be him?"

"Well, it wasn't," Mike said. "He may have lifted her earrings, but he didn't kill her."

He drew Jennie closer. "You okay?" Jennie, who had been quietly weeping since she heard Mother's voice, bobbed her head up and down. "That's my girl. Now what we have to do is get through to

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the police. I have the number to call. And the name. Murphy. He gave it to me in case we remembered anything else that might have a bearing. It's in my jacket pocket."

There was silence after he went to the bedroom, then Roger said, "He's right, of course. About calling the police. It's just that—"

"Yes." Mother's death at the hands of an outsider like Tony was terrible enough. That the murderer should be one of the family made it worse.

"How could she?" Jennie burst out. "Oh, how could she! To kill Mother just because of the Long Island place. Mother had had a drink, I could tell from the way she talked. If I could only have gotten to her first I think I could have made her see she was pushing things too far."

"And stopped her doing it? Maybe. Then again, maybe not. I don't think she would have backed down about taking Tony out there for a vacation."

"I talked to Murphy." Mike was back. "They'll be right over."

Jennie, still intent on her own train of thought, said, "That was the breaking point. The vacation bit. Mother simply didn't grasp how much it mattered."

She had taken it all for granted, the years, the lifetime of devotion—and in the end her "good old soldier" had revolted.

Lydia must have gone out to the Long Island house after it happened. Where else would she go? She was probably still there, unaware of the tape she had left behind. Whatever her state of mind, she was not answering the phone.

That wasn't going to stop the police, of course. Would Murphy, who seemed to be in charge of the investigation, dispatch someone else, go himself, or enlist the services of the local police? Would Jennie and Roger be expected to play a part in the exercise?

"I can't," she said. "Mike, I can't bear to think of seeing her again."

"Don't worry," he reassured her. "I'll take care of it."

As things turned out, Lydia herself had taken care of it. They found her in the garage, slumped over the steering wheel of her car with all the windows shut tight and the motor turned on. Neighbors had seen her drive past around eight o'clock. It was impossible yet to say how much later she had completed her arrangements and settled down to die.

There was a brief note, addressed to Jennie and Roger: "Try to forgive me. All over now. Nothing left. Love from Lyddie." Their childhood name for her. Neither had used it in years. But now that

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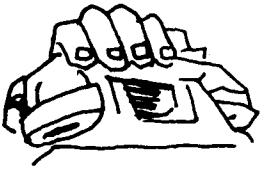
they thought of it, that was how Lydia identified herself over the phone. "Hello, dear. It's Lyddie." As if she were clinging to this small memento of the days when she took care of them while Mother was off with her friends.

"She had so little," Jennie said.

Only what had trickled down to her from the overflow of Mother's richer life. It was there in the note, her own epitaph.

All over now. Nothing left.



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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Could I speak with the dead man's daughter?" Michael asked. "Could I see the house where the crime was committed?"

"You are neither judge nor jury but only the executioner," Konrad Kanici reminded him. "Bercovia has already been convicted."

"I only want to help a brother Gypsy if I can."

"Your help will be to slip the noose around his neck . . ."

PUNISHMENT FOR A GYPSY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

There are places in the mountains of Romania where the old customs die hard, where even the country's Communist government has had little impact on changing the way people have lived and worked and died for centuries. It is a land of superstition compounded by Gypsy lore and vampire myth, a land where one sometimes hopes and prays that things are not what they seem.

The following happened in the village of Bistritz, where people believed that the old superstitions could only be fought by the old laws. Michael Vlado told it to his friend, Captain Segar, one summer's day in Gravita as they watched Gypsy children playing on a freshly made haystack.

Michael had driven down the mountain for supplies, and it was only by chance that he decided to take the rougher but shorter road that led through the village of Bistritz. Unlike Michael's own home at Gravita, Bistritz was not a Gypsy settlement, although a few of his people were known to travel in the area.

There was a small crowd of people in the center of the village, at the crossroads, and rather than try driving around them Michael

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brought his pickup truck to a halt. That was a mistake. A tall man wearing a black suit and a necktie spotted him at once and pointed a finger. "A Gypsy! We have us a Gypsy!"

At once the truck was surrounded by a half dozen men and Michael was dragged out of the cab. "What is this?" he shouted. "Let me go! I am Michael Vlado from Gravita—"

But if they recognized him as a Gypsy leader, it meant nothing to them. "We don't care who you are," the tall man growled. "There's a job to be done and you're the one to do it."

"What job?" Michael managed to ask with growing alarm.

"The Gypsy, Arad Bercovia, is to be executed for murder at high noon. We are following the ancient law that says the first Gypsy met on the road is to serve as his executioner."

"That's insane!" Michael protested. "Even in Romania that custom has not been practiced for a hundred years."

"His crime is an old one," the tall man said. "So we have chosen a punishment just as old."

"You spoke of murder."

"So I did. I am Konrad Kanici, the magistrate of Bistritz. It is I who passed sentence on the Gypsy, Bercovia, for the murder of our shopkeeper, Marco Rapnell, in his own home."

"I am no executioner," Michael insisted. "I was simply driving through your village."

"Hang them both!" someone shouted from the crowd.

The others surged around him, and Michael was outnumbered, at their mercy. He couldn't save the condemned man or himself by continuing to resist. He had an hour before the appointed time of execution, and a great deal could change in an hour's time. "All right," he told the black-clad magistrate. "Show me the man I must execute."

They led him inside a wooden building that served as a meeting hall, to a table where he stood facing a weeping, terrified young man wearing a colorful Gypsy shirt and bandanna and a single gold earring.

"Are you Arad Bercovia?" Michael asked.

"I am Arad."

"This Gypsy is to be your executioner," the magistrate announced, "according to the old law. You will hang from that pine tree in one hour's time."

"No!" the young man cried. "I swear I did not throw the knife which killed Rapnell!"

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"Let me spend some time alone with my Gypsy brother," Michael pleaded. "I must hear his story."

"His story is simple enough. He was traveling with a carnival when he met and seduced Rapnell's daughter Myra. The father threatened to kill him and there was bad blood between them. Two nights ago, the Gypsy came to Rapnell's door and was seen to hurl a knife inside. Rapnell was found with the knife in his chest, dead in his kitchen."

"Who else was in the house at the time?" Michael asked Kanici.

"No one. His daughter had fled the place after they argued."

"He beat her!" the Gypsy insisted. "I went there to warn him to stop treating her like that. I never entered the house!"

"But you threw your knife," Michael said.

"I admit that. Several people saw it."

"And like all Gypsies you are skilled at knife-throwing," said Kanici. "That is all the evidence we need."

"I didn't kill him! He was nowhere in sight when I threw the knife."

Michael was weighing the possibilities. "Could I speak with the dead man's daughter?" he asked. "Could I see the house where the crime was committed?"

"You are neither judge nor jury but only the executioner," Konrad Kanici reminded him. "Bercovia has already been convicted."

"I only want to help a brother Gypsy if I can."

"Your help will be to slip the noose around his neck."

Arad Bercovia wailed at the words and buried his face in his hands. "Come—" Michael turned to Kanici "—show me the scene of the murder. We have nearly an hour before the execution."

"I will take you there," the magistrate decided. "But it will do you no good. The Gypsy will die at noon, and you will be his executioner. It is already written in my book of judgment."

They left Bercovia sobbing at his table in the meeting hall, guarded by one of the villagers. Outside, the crowd still waited. Michael couldn't help noticing the table which now stood beneath the pine tree and the coil of rope resting on it. Kanici led him down the street away from his parked truck, where another guard now stood. Escape seemed as impossible for Michael as it did for the condemned man.

"Here is the house," Kanici announced, pausing before a two-story wooden dwelling badly in need of paint. "Rapnell was buried this morning. Here is his daughter Myra."

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A young woman dressed in black saw them and came forward. Her pale face seemed a reflection of her grief. A bearded man by her side looked equally grief-stricken as he asked, "Has justice been done?"

"He will hang at noon," Konrad Kanici told them. "We have found a passing Gypsy to perform the execution according to the old laws."

The bearded man stared hard at Michael, as if he might know him. "You are from near here?"

"From Gravita, farther up the mountain. I am Michael Vlado."

"My name is Hans Becker. I am a cattle buyer from Leipzig. You may remember I called at your village once last summer but we could come to no agreement."

Michael did remember him. "Are you here buying cattle?"

"I am a friend of the Rapnells. I was visiting them when this terrible thing happened."

"Arad Bercovia claims he did not kill your father," Michael told the young woman.

"I want to believe him but I cannot. Hans and others saw him throw the knife."

"Where was he standing when this happened?"

"Over here," the magistrate said, taking several long strides toward the door. Myra Rapnell unlocked the door and Michael peered down a dim hallway perhaps twenty feet in length. He followed Myra and the magistrate into the house, with Becker behind him. The hallway ended at a blank wall and they turned right to enter the kitchen.

"We ran in the front door, down the hall, and in here," Becker explained, "right after he threw the knife. Myra's father was in the kitchen, slumped at the table where he'd been eating dinner. The knife had struck him right through the heart. It must have killed him instantly."

"This table?" Michael asked, studying the kitchen.

"Yes. He was facing the door."

"But—" Michael shook his head, not comprehending "—I don't understand this. If he was seated at the table, a knife thrown from the front door couldn't have hit him. It would have had to make a right turn at the doorway just as we did."

"Now perhaps you see the reason for my actions," the magistrate said. "The reason why I have returned to the old laws. Arad Bercovia must be executed by another Gypsy, the first one encountered along

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the road, because Bercovia killed Marco Rapnell with a Gypsy curse that guided his knife around a corner to its target."

Black thunderheads had appeared over the top of the mountains, blotting out the sun and casting a brief pall over the village. Michael heard murmurings from the crowd in the street and knew they had taken this as a sign that the hour of the execution was drawing near. He stood in the doorway for a moment studying the clouds and then turned back to face Konrad Kanici.

"I do not believe in Gypsy curses," he said quietly. "This man is innocent."

"There are witnesses—"

"Witnesses who saw him throw a knife." Michael strode back down the corridor and stood in front of the blank wall. "There is not a mark on this wall, not a dig from a thrown knife. What happened to it?"

"The knife lodged in the chest of Marco Rapnell."

"After turning a corner and entering the kitchen."

"Yes."

Rapnell's daughter Myra said, "The Gypsy killed my father. There was no one else in the house."

"Do you believe in curses too?" Michael asked, staring down into her dark eyes.

"My father might have been hit by the knife in the hallway and staggered into the kitchen to die."

The magistrate shook his head. "I saw the body. The knife penetrated the heart. Your father could not have taken more than one or two steps before he died. He certainly couldn't have crossed the kitchen and seated himself behind the table. And there was no blood on the floor."

"The knife in the wound might have prevented much external bleeding," Michael speculated. "Still, if the dead man was actually seated at the table it's doubtful he could have been stabbed in the doorway." He turned back to Myra. "How do you know the house was empty?"

"We searched it," Hans Becker said. "As soon as we found Marco. There was no one here but the dead man."

Michael stepped to the kitchen door, which led to a back porch and a small yard with a garden. "That door was locked," Kanici told him. "I checked it myself."

"Locked from the inside?"

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"Yes. The key was turned and the bolt was thrown."

"And the windows?"

"All these downstairs were locked. There was a breeze coming in through several upstairs." He stared hard at Michael. "But why do you ask these questions? The case has been decided. You prowl and pry like a detective, but there is no mystery to solve."

"Bercovia says he is innocent."

"Did not Cain say he was innocent in the Garden of Eden?"

"The man is beside himself with fear, crying and carrying on like a doomed soul. Is that the attitude of a cold-blooded murderer?"

"I have seen all sorts in my time," the magistrate said.

"What of motive?"

"Talk to Myra Rapnell. She will tell you the motive."

Myra had slipped away while they talked and Michael found her in the back garden, pulling a few weeds with her dainty hands. "That is a dirty job," he observed.

"Someone must do it now that my father is dead."

"Did you live here with him?"

"Yes."

"Your mother—?"

"She ran away years ago with a carnival man who was passing through the mountains. That was when I was very young. My father never forgot it. I think that was one reason he hated Arad so much."

Michael looked at the sky. The thunderheads were passing to the south and the storm seemed to have avoided them. "Why?" he asked. "What was the reason he hated Arad?"

"Because of the carnival. When I met Arad he was a knife-thrower in a traveling carnival. He left the show and stayed here because he was in love with me. For my father it was history repeating itself. That's why he asked Hans Becker to visit us. He wanted Hans to win me over, make me forget about Arad."

"Was he succeeding?"

"All too well. And my father didn't stop with Hans and me." She brushed some garden dirt from her hands. "He had Hans track down the carnival where it was playing in Bucharest and bring the woman here who had worked with Arad in his act."

"She's here now?" Michael asked.

Myra nodded. "She's here. Hans knows where, but he won't tell me."

The magistrate came to the kitchen door. "In thirty minutes you

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must do your duty, Gypsy," he called out. "Do not try to escape or you will join your brother with a noose around your neck."

"I will be there to see justice done," Michael promised.

He found Hans Becker, the Leipzig cattle buyer, on the road in front of the house. "Are you satisfied we tell the truth?" the bearded man asked Michael.

"I am satisfied of nothing. I must hear the story once more, of what happened when Myra's father died."

"I was coming to the house with a visitor. As I approached, I saw that the Gypsy was standing by the open front door."

"You're certain the door was open?"

"Yes. People sometimes leave them open in this warm weather."

"Go on," Michael urged.

"He shouted for Myra's father to come out, to face him. He was wearing his bright Gypsy carnival shirt, as if to taunt the man. Myra told you about her mother?"

"Yes."

"Then he brought his arm back in a throwing position and I saw the knife in it."

"What sort of a knife?"

"A slim balanced throwing knife without the guard or crosspiece. The sort used in knife-throwing acts. The sort that killed Rapnell."

"Go on."

"He hurled it into the house with a shout as we came running up."

"Who was with you?"

"I—a visitor."

"Myra has already told me you located the woman who worked with Bercovia in his knife-throwing act."

"Yes," Becker admitted. "She was with me. Her name is Dora Gitano—I found her with the carnival in our nation's capital. We were coming to see Rapnell. The magistrate was with us."

"Kanici?" This news surprised Michael. "He was with you at the time of the murder?"

"Yes. We entered the house together."

"And who was first into the kitchen? Who reached the body first?"

"Kanici and I entered together. I kept Dora back so she wouldn't see Rapnell. We could tell from the doorway that he was dead."

"Where is Dora Gitano now?"

"At the inn by the crossroads. She wants to see Bercovia again before the hanging."

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"And I want to see her," Michael decided. "Take me to her."

"Only if the magistrate approves," Becker answered uneasily.

Michael saw Konrad Kanici waiting for him down the road. "It is time to get back," the magistrate said as Michael approached. "It is almost noon."

"One last thing, sir," Michael said. "I must speak with Dora Gitano, the woman who knew the Gypsy at the carnival."

"That is impossible. There is not enough time remaining."

Michael stepped very close, facing the man in black. "Listen to me. You found me by chance on the road, driving through your village. You are the magistrate here—the law, if the federal police are not to be summoned. But I am the law in Gravita, my own village. Perhaps you have heard of King Carranza, who rules us."

"I have heard the name," Kanici admitted. "But he is crippled."

"Exactly. And so I carry out the orders in his place. I conduct the Gypsy courts, and I pass judgment among my people just as you do here."

"Then you know you must respect our laws."

"I do respect them. But I will never respect a belief in superstition, not even Gypsy superstition. Knives cannot be thrown around corners, even by the most skilled performers."

"I agree, but Arad Bercovia was not performing when he hurled that knife. He was bent on murder, and he brought all his Gypsy powers to bear. He willed that knife to seek out his victim. Call it a curse, call it what you wish."

"If you believe such Gypsy powers, you must believe he could escape from your noose if he wished."

"Not if another Gypsy tightens the knot."

Michael sighed. "Allow me to speak with this woman, Dora Gitano."

Kanici took out his pocket watch. "It is ten minutes to twelve. You will find her with the condemned man."

Dora Gitano was a lithe, sensuous woman who moved like a cat about the large meeting room, never taking her eyes from Bercovia's face. She treated Michael as an unneeded intruder, and precious minutes slipped away before he finally managed to get through to her. "I was stopped on the road an hour ago and pressed into service as Arad's executioner," he said.

"You would kill a fellow Gypsy?"

"I seem to have no choice, unless you can help me."

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She slowed in her prowling. "I am not a Gypsy, if that is what you think. Arad and I only worked together in the carnival."

Michael glanced at Bercovia, who now seemed paralyzed with fright. "He threw knives at you?"

She nodded, wetting her lips with a darting, nervous tongue. "I stood against a board and he outlined my body with knives. It was a trick, of course. He didn't really throw them. The knives shot out of the back of the board around my body. We were very good at it—until he met her."

"Myra?"

"Yes. The carnival was playing in a nearby town a few weeks back. He left it to stay near her."

Michael glanced over at Arad. "Do you love him?"

She hesitated for an instant. "No. No, I don't love him. But I feel sorry for him. We were very close."

"You were there when the murder was committed. Do you think Arad killed that man with his knife?"

"No, of course not. He had dozens of those throwing knives. Anyone could have stolen one to frame him for the crime."

"But if I cannot prove it within the next five minutes I am the one who must tighten the noose around his throat."

"There is another way," she said, her voice barely a whisper so that the guard wouldn't overhear.

"What?"

She turned her back to the guard and slipped a hand into her purse. It came out holding a tiny American-made pistol. "Only two shots," she whispered, "but it would be enough for you to escape with him."

Michael reached out to take the weapon and slip it in his pants pocket, wondering if he could bring himself to use it, even to spare the life of an innocent man.

The door of the meeting room swung open and Konrad Kanici stood outlined against the leaden sky. "It is time, Gypsy," he intoned.

The guard tugged Bercovia to his feet. "It's not fair," the doomed man complained. "I never threw the knife that killed Marco Rapnell."

They led him outside and Michael followed along with Dora Gitano. He saw Myra standing in the crowd of spectators along with Hans Becker. As Michael reached the road, he glimpsed the noose hanging from the pine tree and stopped, frozen in his tracks until the magistrate poked a finger in the small of his back.

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"Do your duty, Gypsy, or you will join him up there."

Michael climbed onto the table and helped the condemned man up. The crowd moved a little closer, hemming them in. He felt the weapon in his pocket and wondered what use it could be to him now. Two bullets might do more to infuriate the crowd than to scatter it. For all he knew, the gun might not even be loaded. An unloaded pistol might be the perfect weapon for a Gypsy who didn't throw knives.

Didn't throw knives—

Michael asked the condemned man a single question, making himself heard above the increasing roar of the crowd.

Arad Bercovia turned his sad eyes to Michael's and answered. The fight had suddenly gone out of him. "It isn't fair," he insisted. "It isn't fair to hang me because of a foolish superstition. I have no magical powers."

"The verdict wasn't fair," Michael agreed, tightening the noose around the Gypsy's neck. "But it was just."

Captain Segar sat up, staring at Michael as he finished his story. Do you mean you hanged the man, Michael? A fellow Gypsy?"

"I hanged him because he was guilty. If I had rescued him from that mob it would only have been to deliver him to the State executioners. One could hardly expect a Gypsy to be spared in a murder case."

"But he swore he was innocent. You told me the man was sobbing with fear, saying it wasn't fair."

"He never said he was innocent of the murder. He said he had not thrown the knife that killed Rapnell, and he didn't. The question I asked him on the gallows was whether he had stabbed Rapnell. And he had. He stabbed him at the kitchen table."

"But he never entered the house," Segar objected.

"We had only his word for that. The house was empty except for Rapnell, and he was dead. I believe Bercovia went to the house to argue with Rapnell over his daughter. Rapnell had recently brought Hans Becker to the village to induce his daughter away from the Gypsy, and this must have infuriated Bercovia. They had words, and he stabbed Myra's father at the table. Then, as he was leaving the house, he spotted Becker and Dora approaching with the magistrate. He was caught in the act, unless he could make them believe he'd never entered."

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"Then all that business of hurling the knife through the open door was only pretense?"

"Yes. When I noticed how securely locked the back door and windows were, it seemed strange that the front door would be standing open alone. If it had been open for ventilation, Rapnell would have opened a window or the back door as well. When Bercovia was spotted at the open door he pretended he'd found it that way and acted out his stunt of hurling a knife into the house. But as Dora Gitano told me, he didn't really throw the knives in his carnival act. They sprang out of the board behind her, giving the illusion they were thrown with great skill. Bercovia didn't really throw the knife through that doorway, either—he palmed it and slipped it into the sleeve of the fancy Gypsy shirt he was wearing. He knew Rapnell would be found with the knife in his chest, but he also knew there was no way the knife seen to be thrown by him could have traveled around the corner to reach his victim. By presenting them with an impossibility he hoped to shroud the real circumstances of the killing and gain freedom for himself.

"When I remembered that Bercovia only pretended to throw knives in his carnival act, it tied in with the fact that no knife, or mark of a knife, had been found in the wall opposite the front doorway. The knife never hit the wall because Bercovia never threw it. Yet the vanishing of that knife plus the knife in Rapnell's chest was too much of a coincidence. Bercovia must have known of the dead man and the method of murder. He could only have known if he'd already been in the house to kill Rapnell."

Captain Segar nodded. "In the city he might have gotten away with it. The police would agree that the knife could not have turned a corner and they would have concluded that Rapnell must have been killed by someone else. But in these superstitious mountains where Gypsies are still thought to possess magical powers, the magistrate simply concluded that Gypsy magic had directed the path of the knife. No wonder Bercovia cried and carried on so, insisting that it wasn't fair. He'd presented them with an impossibility which they simply ignored because he was a Gypsy."

"He was right," Michael Vlado said. "It wasn't fair."

"If I had been with you, this never would have happened. I would have taken charge of the prisoner and forbidden the execution."

"But then justice would not have been done. Perhaps it's better the way it happened—better for everyone except Arad Bercovia."

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

The makeup girl concentrated on removing the traces of powder from Ben's neck and shirt-collar, and studiously avoided comment.

"I suppose you think this is sick, don't you?" demanded Ben.

"It's none of my business," she said, but added: "If she is carrying on, it's not surprising, is it? Not with the hours we work."

"Not surprising? I tell you, I was bloody surprised! Just think how you'd feel if your husband, or bloke, was two-timing you while you were at the studio."

"He is," said the girl . . .

BREAKFAST TELEVISION

by ROBERT BARNARD

The coming of breakfast television has been a great boon to the British.

Caroline Worsley thought so anyway, as she sat in bed eating toast and sipping tea, the flesh of her arm companionably warm against the flesh of Michael's arm. Soon they would make love again, perhaps while the consumer lady had her spot about dangerous toys, or during the review of the papers, or the resident doctor's phone-in on acne. They would do it when and how the fancy took them—or as Michael's fancy took him, for he was very imperative at times—and this implied no dislike or disrespect for the breakfast-time performer concerned. For Caroline liked them all, and could lie there quite happily watching any one of them—David, the doctor; Jason, the pop-chart commentator; Selma, the fashion expert; Jemi-

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ma, the problems expert; Reg, the sports-roundup man; and Maria, the linkup lady. And of course Ben, the linkup man.

Ben—her husband.

It had all worked out very nicely indeed. Ben was called for by the studio at four-thirty. Michael always waited for half an hour after that, in case Ben had forgotten something and made a sudden dash back to the flat for it. Michael was a serious, slightly gauche young man, who would hate to be caught out in a situation both compromising and ridiculous. Michael was that rare thing, a studious student—though very well built, too, Caroline told herself appreciatively. His interests were work, athletics, and sex.

It was Caroline who had initiated him into the pleasures of regular sex. At five o'clock, his alarm clock went off—though, as he told Caroline, it was rarely necessary. His parents were away in Africa, dispensing aid, know-how, and Oxfam beatitudes in some Godforsaken part of Africa, so he was alone in their flat. He put his clothes on so that in the unlikely event of his being seen in the corridor he could pretend to be going out. But he never had been. By five past, he was in Caroline's flat, and in the bedroom she shared with Ben. They had almost an hour and a half of sleeping and lovemaking before breakfast television began.

Not that Michael watched it with the enthusiasm of Caroline. Sometimes he took a book along and read it while Caroline was drawing in her breath in horror at combustible toys, or tut-tutting at some defaulting businessman who had left his customers in the lurch.

He would lie there immersed in *The Mechanics of the Money Supply* or *Some Problems of Exchange-Rate Theory*—something reasonably straightforward, anyway, because he had to read against the voice from the set, and from time to time he was conscious of Ben looking directly at him. He never quite got used to that.

It didn't bother Caroline at all.

"Oh, look, his tie's gone askew," she would say, or, "You know, Ben's much balder than he was twelve months ago—I've never noticed it in the flesh." Michael seldom managed to assent to such propositions with any easy grace. He was much too conscious of balding, genial, avuncular Ben grinning out from the television screen as he tried to wring from some graceless pop-star three words strung together consecutively that actually made sense. "I think he's getting fatter in the face," said Caroline, licking marmalade off her fingers . . .

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"I am not getting fatter in the face!" shouted Ben. "Balder, yes, fatter in the face definitely not!" He added in a voice soaked in vitriol: "Bitch."

He was watching a video of yesterday's lovemaking on a set in his dressing-room, after the morning's television session had ended. His friend Frank, from the technical staff, had rigged up the camera in the cupboard of his study, next door to the bedroom. The small hole that was necessary in the wall had been expertly disguised. Luckily, Caroline was a deplorable housewife. Eventually she might have discovered the sound apparatus under the double bed, but even then she would probably have assumed it was some junk of Ben's that he had shoved there out of harm's way.

"Hypocritical swine!" yelled Ben, as he heard Caroline laughing with Michael that the Shadow Foreign Secretary had really wiped the floor with him in that interview. "She told me when I got home yesterday how well I'd handled it!"

As the shadowy figures on the screen turned to each other again, their bare flesh glistening dully in the dim light, Ben growled. "Whore!"

The makeup girl concentrated on removing the traces of powder from his neck and shirt-collar, and studiously avoided comment.

"I suppose you think this is sick, don't you?" demanded Ben.

"It's none of my business," she said, but added: "If she is carrying on, it's not surprising, is it? Not with the hours we work."

"Not surprising? I tell you, I was bloody surprised! Just think how you'd feel if your husband, or bloke, was two-timing you while you were at the studio."

"He is," said the girl. But Ben hadn't heard. He frequently didn't hear other people when he was off camera. His comfortable, sympathetic-daddy image was something that seldom spilled over into his private life. Indeed, at his worst, he could slip up even on camera: he could be leaned forward, listening to his interviewees with every appearance of the warmest interest, then reveal by his next question that he hadn't heard a word they were saying. But that happened very infrequently, and only when he was extremely preoccupied. Ben was very good at his job.

"Now they'll have tea," he said. "Everyone needs a tea-break in their working morning."

Tea—

Shortly after this, there was a break in Caroline's delicious early-

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morning routine: her son Malcolm came home for a long weekend from school. Michael became no more than the neighbor's son at whom she smiled in the corridor. She and Malcolm had breakfast round the kitchen table. It was on Tuesday morning, when Malcolm was due to depart later in the day, that Ben made one of his little slips.

He was interviewing Cassy Le Beau from the long-running pop group The Crunch, and as he leaned forward to introduce a clip from the video of their latest musical crime he said:

"Now, this is going to interest Caroline and Michael, watching at home—"

"Why did he say Michael?" asked Caroline aloud, before she could stop herself.

"He meant Malcolm," said their son. "Anyway, it's bloody insulting, him thinking I'd be interested in The Crunch."

Because Malcolm was currently rehearsing Elgar's Second with the London Youth Orchestra. Ben was about two years out of date with his interests.

"Did you see that yesterday morning?" Caroline asked Michael the next day.

"What?"

"Ben's slip on *Wake Up, Britain* yesterday."

"I don't watch breakfast telly when I'm not with you."

"Well, he did one of those 'little messages home' that he does. You probably don't remember, but there was all this focus about families when *Wake Up, Britain* started, and Ben got into the habit of putting little messages to Malcolm and me into the program. Ever so cosy and ever so bogus. Anyway, he did one yesterday, as Malcolm was home—only he said 'Caroline and Michael.' Not Malcolm, but Michael."

Michael shrugged.

"Just a slip of the tongue."

"But his own *son!* And for the slip to come out as *Michael!*"

"These things happen," said Michael, putting his arm around her and pushing her head back onto the pillow. "Was there a Michael on the show yesterday?"

"There was Michael Heseltine on, as usual."

"There you are, you see."

"But Heseltine's an ex-cabinet minister. He would *never* call him Michael."

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"But the name was in his head. These things happen. Remember, Ben's getting old."

"True," said Caroline, who was two years younger than her husband.

"Old!" shouted Ben, dabbing at his artificially darkened eyebrows, one eye on the screen. "You think I'm old? I'll show you I've still got some bolts left in my locker!"

He had dispensed with the services of the makeup girl. He had been the only regular on *Wake Up, Britain* to demand one anyway, and the studio was surprised but pleased when Ben decided she was no longer required. Now he could watch the previous evening's cavortings without the damper of her adolescent disapproval from behind his shoulder.

And now he could plan.

One of the factors that just had to be turned to his advantage was Caroline's deplorable housekeeping. All the table tops of their kitchen were littered with bits of this and that—herbs, spices, sauces, old margarine-tubs, bits of jam on dishes. The fridge was like the basement of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the freezer was a record of their married life. And on the window-ledge in the kitchen were the things he used to do his little bit of gardening—

Ben and Caroline inhabited one of twenty modern service flats in a block. Most of the gardening was done by employees of the landlords, yet some little patches were alloted to tenants who expressed an interest. Ben had always kept up his patch, though—as was the way of such things—it was more productive of self-satisfaction than of fruit or veg. "From our own garden," he would say as he served his guests horrid little bowls of red currants.

Already on the window-ledge in the kitchen there was a little bottle of paraquat.

That afternoon, he pottered around in his moldy little patch. By the time he had finished and washed his hands under the kitchen tap, the paraquat had found its way next to the box of teabags standing by the kettle. The top of the paraquat was loose, having been screwed only about halfway round.

"Does you good to get out on your own patch of earth," Ben observed to Caroline as he went through to his study.

The next question that presented itself was: when?

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There were all sorts of possibilities—including that the police would immediately arrest him for murder, he was reconciled to that—but he thought that on the whole it would be best to do it on the morning when he was latest home. Paraquat could be a long time in taking effect, he knew, but there was always a chance that they would not decide to call medical help until it was too late. If he was to come home to a poisoned wife and lover in the flat, he wanted them to be well and truly dead. Wednesday was the day when all the breakfast-TV team met in committee to hear what was planned for the next week—which aging star would be plugging her memoirs, which singer plugging his forthcoming British tour. Wednesdays Ben often didn't get home till early afternoon.

Wednesday it was.

Tentatively in his mental engagements-book he pencilled in Wednesday the fifteenth of May.

Whether the paraquat would be in the teapot of the Teasmade, or in the teabag, or how it would be administered was a minor matter that he could settle long before the crucial Tuesday night when the tea things for the morning had to be got ready. The main thing was that everything was decided.

The fifteenth of May—undoubtedly a turning-point in her life—began badly for Caroline. First of all, Ben kissed her goodbye before he set off for the studio, something he hadn't done since the early days of his engagement on breakfast television. Michael had come in at five o'clock as usual, but his lovemaking was forced, lacking in tenderness. Caroline lay for an hour in his arms afterwards, wondering if something was worrying him. He didn't say anything for some time—not till the television was switched on. Probably he relied on the bromides and the plugs to distract Caroline's attention from what he was going to say.

He had taken up his textbook and the kettle of the Teasmade was beginning to hum when he said, in his gruff, teenage way:

"Won't be much more of this."

Caroline was watching clips from a Frank Bruno fight and not giving him her full attention. When it was over, she turned to him.

"Sorry—what did you say?"

"I said there won't be much more of this."

A dagger went to her heart, which seemed to stop beating for minutes. When she could speak, the words came out terribly middle-class-matron.

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"I don't quite understand. Much more of what?"

"This. You and me together in the mornings."

"You don't mean your parents are coming home early?"

"No. I've—got a flat. Nearer college. So there's not so much traveling in the mornings and evenings."

"You're just *moving out?*"

"Pretty much so. I can't live with my parents forever."

Caroline's voice grew louder and higher.

"You're not living with your parents. It's six months before they come home. You're moving out *on me*. Do you have the impression that I'm the sort of person you can just move in with when it suits you and then flit away from when it doesn't suit you any longer?"

"Well—yes, actually. I'm a free agent."

"You *bas*tard! You *bas*tard!"

She would have liked to take him by the shoulders and shake him till the teeth rattled in his head. Instead, she sat there on the bed, coldly furious. It was 7:15. The kettle whistled and poured boiling water onto the teabags in the teapot.

"Have some tea or coffee," said Ben on the screen to his politician guest, with a smile that came out as a death's-head grin. "It's about early-morning teatime."

"It's someone else, isn't it?" said Caroline, her voice kept steady with difficulty. "A new girl friend."

"All right, it's a new girl friend," agreed Michael.

"Someone younger."

"Of course someone younger," said Michael, taking up his book again and sinking into monetarist theory.

Silently Caroline screamed: Of course someone younger! What the hell's that supposed to mean? They don't come any older than you? Of course I was just passing the time with a crone like you until someone my own age came along?

"You're moving in with a girl," she said, the desolation throbbing in her voice.

"Yeah," said Michael from within his Hayek.

"Tea all right?" Ben asked his guest.

Caroline sat there, watching the flickering images on the screen, while the tea in the pot turned from hot to warm. The future spread before her like a desert—a future as wife and mother. What kind of life was that, for God's sake? For some odd reason, a future as *lover* had seemed, when she had thought about it at all, fulfilling, traditional, and dignified. Now any picture she might have of the

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years to come was turned into a hideous, mocking, negative image, just as the body beside her in the bed had turned from a glamorous sex object into a boorish, ungrateful teenager.

They were having trouble in the *Wake Up, Britain* studio, where the two link-up people had got mixed up as to who was introducing what. Caroline focused on the screen—she always enjoyed it when Ben muffed something.

"Sorry," said Ben, smiling his kindly uncle smile. "I thought it was Maria, but in fact it's me. Let's see—I know it's David, our resident medico, but actually I don't know what your subject is today, David."

"Poison," said David.

But the camera had not switched to him, and the instant he dropped the word into the ambient atmosphere Caroline—and one million other viewers—saw Ben's jaw drop and an expression of panic flash like lightning through his eyes.

"I've had a lot of letters from parents of small children," said David, in his calm, everything-will-be-all-right voice, "about what to do if the kids get hold of poison. Old medicines, household detergents, gardening stuff—they can all be dangerous, and some can be deadly." Caroline saw Ben, the camera still agonizingly on him, swallow hard and put his hand up to his throat. Then, mercifully, the director changed the shot at last to the doctor, leaning forward and doing his thing. "So here are a few basic rules about what to do in that sort of emergency—"

Caroline's was not a quick mind, but suddenly a succession of images came together: Ben's kiss that morning, his smile as he offered his guest early-morning tea, a bottle of paraquat standing next to the box of teabags in the kitchen, Ben's dropping jaw at the sudden mention of poison.

"Michael," she said.

"What?" he asked, hardly bothering to take his head out of his book.

She looked at the self-absorbed, casually cruel body and her blood boiled.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Let's have tea. It'll be practically cold by now."

She poured two cups, and handed him his. He put aside his book, which he had hardly been reading, his mind congratulating himself on having got out of this lightly. He took the cup and sat on the bed

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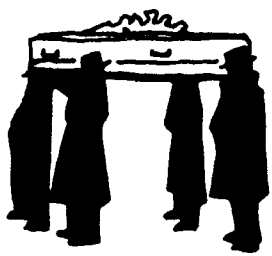
watching the screen, where the sports man was now introducing highlights of last night's athletics meeting from Oslo.

"Boy!" said Michael appreciatively, sipping his tea. "That was a great run!"

He took a gulp, then two or three more to finish the cup, then handed it back to Caroline.

Caroline did not take up her tea, but sat there looking at the graceless youth. Round her lips there played a smile of triumphal revenge—a smile the camera whirring away in the secrecy of the study cupboard perfectly caught for Ben, for the criminal courts, and for posterity.



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a *NEW* short story by

SHIZUKO NATSUKI

"I've already had two close calls," Tokiko said. "I drank some orange juice from the refrigerator that tasted a little strange—afterward I was sick for hours. A few days later, I sat down at my dressing table and a heavy brass ornament fell off the shelf above it and almost hit me. It had been balanced right on the edge of the shelf so that the shock of my sitting had been enough to send it crashing . . ."

A VERY CAREFUL MAN

by SHIZUKO NATSUKI

It was two o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon when Tokiko Saijo came to visit me, Tuesday being my day off from the beauty salon. Tokiko was only two years younger than I, which would make her thirty-four, although she could easily pass for younger. She was only five feet tall, and while she was not exactly beautiful she was very attractive.

"How have you been?" I asked as I sat down across the living room from her. She was very well dressed in a moss-green suit with a matching jade ring and looked like the only daughter of wealthy parents she was. But she also looked a little pale and seemed to have lost some weight again. "Are you feeling okay?"

I met Tokiko only once every two or three months and whenever I did she always seemed to have some new illness to complain about.

"No, I think I've caught another cold and recently I've had these terrible headaches. It may be because I can't sleep at night."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry to hear that. Why can't you sleep?" The worst of the heat of the summer had passed, and although the weather

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was still very good it was cool enough to make a blanket welcome at night.

"I have always been a bit of a worrier, and at night it is even worse."

"What have you got to worry about?" I asked, smiling at her. It was always the same when she came to visit—not only did she feel unwell, but she generally had something to worry about, too.

Tokiko sat looking vacantly through the window, then, turning her attention to her lap, she sighed and said with a frown, "I think Sadakazu means to kill me."

"What! What are you talking about?" I said with a laugh. "You shouldn't joke about a thing like that—you couldn't ask for a better husband than Sadakazu."

"I am quite serious. I felt that he wanted to do it before, but I think he has made up his mind this time." She gave a shudder. Her face became even paler and I realized that even if it was not true, she seemed to believe what she had just told me.

"But what makes you think he would want to do that?"

"He has taken out a huge life-insurance policy on me."

"But that was some time ago. I remember you told me he had a friend who worked for an insurance company and he had not been able to say no."

"That's right. He started by taking out a twenty-million-yen policy about five years ago, but he has gradually built on that. Now it has reached one hundred million."

"How about him? Has he a policy as well?"

"Oh, yes. He has taken out the same amount on himself with me as the beneficiary."

"Well, then."

"No, that is just the kind of person he is—he never takes risks. If he had taken out such a large policy in one go, it would have looked suspicious, so he did it over a period of five years or so. And by taking out a policy on himself, too, he can say he wanted to make sure I would want for nothing if he were to die first. But he is only forty-one and the picture of good health—he doesn't need to take out so much insurance."

"He is only thinking of you."

"No, it's only camouflage to hide the fact that he has taken out such a large policy on me. If I were to die, he would get not only the insurance, but also the land, the house, the jewelry, and stock that

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my parents left me. He has put up with me for twelve years but now he wants to be free."

She seemed to believe what she was saying. If it had come from another woman it would have sounded spiteful, but Tokiko's weak voice was too filled with sadness for me to remain unmoved.

Tokiko and I had worked together in the office of a large fashion manufacturer about thirteen years ago, but during her second year with the company Tokiko married Sadakazu Saijo. Saijo was seven years older than Tokiko and one of the most promising young men in the sales department. He had a powerful, athletic build and was very good-looking. He had the reputation of being very good at his work and was chased by all the girls in the office, but after dating her for only six months he chose to marry Tokiko.

"I don't like to think he married me only for my money, but I know that I was never good enough for him. I couldn't even bear him any children."

I had heard about Saijo's lovers. Not only was he attractive and an achiever, but due to his wife's inheritance he had no shortage of money and he knew his submissive wife would not complain if he had several women. Tokiko had often told me about them—he seemed to have one steady mistress and also often picked up girls in bars.

"He's got a new mistress," Tokiko said. "She's only twenty-five or so and works as a hostess in a bar. They say she's very beautiful."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Yes. One of my old high-school friends works at the same club. She told me about her."

"Don't worry—it won't last."

"I don't know. He seems to be very serious this time. That's probably why he decided I'm more trouble than I'm worth. If he gets rid of me, he'll have all that more freedom and money to enjoy himself."

Tears overflowed her eyes and left two shiny trails down her face.

"You're letting your imagination run away with you, Tokiko. All you need is a strong drink and a good night's sleep."

"I've already had two close calls," she said, ignoring me. "I drank some orange juice from the refrigerator that tasted a little strange—afterward I was sick for hours. A few days later, I sat down at my dressing table and a heavy brass ornament fell off the shelf above it and almost hit me. It had been balanced right on the edge of the shelf so that the shock of my sitting had been enough to send it crashing."

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"It's just a coincidence."

"Next week Sadakazu is going to take me on a trip to celebrate our wedding anniversary."

"That will be nice."

"Yes, he is very excited about it. He says he wants to go somewhere he has never been before. Neither of us has ever been to Shikoku, so he has booked us into two hotels there, one in Okudogo and the other at Cape Ashizuri."

I felt the tension build in me. Cape Ashizuri is a famous place for committing suicide.

"I think he means to carry out his plan during the trip," she told me.

"If that is the case, don't go," I said frankly. "But, Tokiko, if you distrust Sadakazu this much, why don't you divorce him?"

Tokiko wiped the tears from her face with her handkerchief and said in an even fainter voice, "If I were to leave him, I would be completely on my own. I haven't anyone but him. When I think what it would be like to live in that house alone, to eat my meals without anyone to talk to, to sleep alone in a cold bed, I realize I would be better off dead. I would rather Sadakazu killed me than leave me. Whatever he did afterward, he would never be able to forget me. And if it came to light what he did to me, it would be as if he had committed suicide with me."

"But what if it never became known? What if he committed the perfect crime?"

"He would always have a guilty conscience—he would always remember me."

"That's ridiculous. If anything happens to you I'll go straight to the police. But it would be even better if you could write something down or leave a recording."

"A recording?"

"That's right—if you taped a detailed account of why you think your husband wants to kill you in your own voice, it would be an irrefutable piece of evidence should anything happen to you."

"Do you really think so?"

She seemed to take my suggestion seriously, but no matter how I tried I couldn't persuade her to change her mind about going on the trip.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll be careful. If I don't go, I'll never know Sadakazu's real intentions. And we haven't been anywhere together since our honeymoon, not once . . ."

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Cape Ashizuri is on the southernmost tip of the island of Shikoku. It is covered with a semitropical forest, but there are several footpaths leading through it to the lighthouse and in several places these paths break out of the forest and present the spectator with breathtaking views out over the sea. Braver visitors make their way all the way up to the edge of the cliff where they can watch the sea churning against the rocks two hundred and fifty feet below. The sight seems to draw you in and many have had to forcibly draw themselves back to stop from jumping. Even when the path returns to the dark forest, the sea continues to make itself heard as a dull roar which is never far away.

At six-thirty on the evening of Saturday, November the twenty-seventh, a young couple walking along a path near the eastern end of the cape heard a cry for help and, looking over the edge of the cliff, they saw a woman clinging to a small bush about twelve feet from the top. She seemed to be standing on a slight ledge, and by holding onto the bush she was in no immediate danger. But the cliff, at this point, extended over two hundred feet above the sea, and although it was not exactly vertical it was steep enough to make one very dizzy. The couple hurried to notify the police, who sent a man with mountaineering experience who managed to save her. The woman was slightly built and wearing a smart suit. She had been soaked by the spray from the sea and was frozen through when she was finally brought to the top, where she collapsed, shaking with exhaustion.

"What happened?" asked the policeman.

When she could find her voice, she managed to say, "I was walking along the cliff when someone suddenly came from behind and pushed me."

"Pushed you!"

"Yes—a little harder and I would have gone straight down to the sea. As it was, I slid some way before I was able to stop myself. I was sure I was going to die."

"Can you describe who pushed you?"

"No, I didn't see anyone."

The man looked her over in the light of his torch and saw that her face and hands were a mass of scrapes and cuts and the front of her suit was filthy from her slide down the cliff. The cape being a famous place for suicide, he had half suspected she had tried to take her own life, but if what she claimed was true it was attempted homicide.

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"Are you staying at a hotel near here?"
"Yes, the Ashizuri Cape Hotel."
"Where do you come from?"
"Nagoya."
"Are you alone?"
"No, I'm here with my husband."

She said her name was Tokiko Saijo and was taken to have her wounds seen to. None were serious and the doctor on duty at the hospital soon bandaged them. While she was being treated, the policeman telephoned his superior six miles away in Shimizu, who said he would be right over.

He then called Tokiko's husband at the Ashizuri Cape Hotel and asked him to come and collect her.

Waiting with her for her husband, the policeman said, "You were lucky to get away with a few scratches. If you had fallen to the bottom, you would have died for sure. Have you any idea who would try to kill you?"

"No," she replied in a small but clear voice. "However, this is the second time it has happened."

"What?"

"Yes. I almost fell off the ramparts of Matsuyama Castle this morning."

He stared. Then:

"Were you pushed that time, too?"

"I think so. I managed to grab a tree and stop myself from falling, but when I looked around there was no one in sight."

"Where was your husband?"

"He had gone to the washroom."

"Has he been with you the whole trip?"

"Yes, it was he who suggested we get away together to celebrate our wedding anniversary."

At that moment a big man in a grey suit hurried in. When Tokiko saw him, she ran over and clung to him, crying. He enfolded her in his arms and hugged her close.

"Are you all right? What are all these bandages?" As he spoke, he looked over at the policeman inquiringly. "What's happened?"

A sergeant arrived from the Shimizu police and took over the inquiry. He asked Sadakazu to tell him everything he knew.

"A little before dusk, Tokiko said she wanted to go up on the cliffs and look at the sea, so I agreed to go with her." He went on to explain

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how they had walked to the end of the cape and watched the sea until a little after six.

"We were together as far as the end of the cape, but after I started back I suddenly realized Tokiko was no longer with me. It was getting dark and I had gone to the edge of the cliff to watch the sea. When I noticed she wasn't with me, I assumed she had lost sight of me and gone to look for me. I searched the area for some time, but there was no trace of her so I decided she had gone back to the hotel. I returned along the same path we had come, but there was no sign of her along the way and she wasn't at the hotel, either. I was worried, but I thought she would be back soon. I don't have to tell you how relieved I was when you called and said she was all right."

The sergeant turned to Tokiko and asked for her side of the story.

"I lost sight of Sadakazu when he went down to the cliff edge and, thinking he had gone farther around the cape, I decided to follow. The path was deserted and I had just decided to turn back when someone pushed me from behind and I fell. For a minute I thought I was going to die, but as I slid down the cliff face my feet found a small boulder and I managed to break my fall.

"I don't know how long I clung to the bushes. It seemed hours, and every time I looked down I felt I was being sucked in by the waves." As she spoke, the fear came back to her and she clung to Sadakazu.

"I understand you had a similar experience when you visited Matsuyama Castle earlier today."

"Yes, someone pushed me from behind when my husband was in the washroom."

When he had returned to her and heard what happened, Sadakazu said, he had searched the whole area but had not been able to find anyone suspicious. "My wife is a very nervous person," he added, "and to tell you the truth I only half believed her when she told me about it. I certainly never thought it would happen again."

They both agreed they had no idea who might want to harm her and Tokiko could not even say if her assailant had been a man or a woman, let alone give a description.

As there was no one else with a motive for murdering Tokiko, suspicion automatically fell on Sadakazu.

The sergeant managed to learn that not only was their house and land in Tokiko's name but that she also owned a good deal more property she had inherited from her parents. "Do you have a life-insurance policy?" he asked Sadakazu.

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"Why, yes."

"Could you tell me how much it is for?"

"Yes, of course. One hundred million."

"One hundred!" the constable exclaimed in surprise.

"Actually, one of my friends is an insurance salesman and he talked me into it," Sadakazu explained quickly. "I've a policy, too, for the same amount, with Tokiko as the beneficiary. As you can see, she is very shy and wouldn't be able to look after herself. I'm seven years older than she is and I want to know that should I be the first to die she will want for nothing."

The sergeant sat and looked at him, and although he did not put it into words it was obvious that he thought it very unlikely that Sadakazu would be the first to die.

When the phone rang a little after eleven on Tuesday the thirtieth of November, I guessed immediately that it was Tokiko. I had spoken to her on the Thursday before she set out on her trip, and although she didn't say it in so many words it was obvious that she was thinking it was her final farewell. I told her that if she was so worried she should pretend she was ill and postpone the trip, but she had made up her mind and that was that.

That weekend at the beauty salon, I had been half expecting a phone call telling me she had had some kind of accident, but when Monday dawned without my hearing anything I figured they had returned the night before without mishap. I'd had to work on Monday and so I expected her to ring me on Tuesday morning.

"Hello, it's Tokiko." She sounded a little more lighthearted than before she left.

"Welcome home. Did you get back on Sunday?"

"Yes, but I was too exhausted to ring you."

"Well, you sound fit enough now. How was the trip?"

"It was great."

"The weather was on your side."

"Yes, the sun seemed to be stronger down there and it was quite warm in the afternoons."

"So you were worried over nothing, then," I said. "Nothing happened, did it?"

Tokiko paused for a moment before replying. "I wouldn't say that nothing happened, but it was not quite as I feared. Things did not go quite as Sadakazu had hoped, either."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but she definitely

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sounded happier than last time we had spoken. "May I come over and see you this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes, anytime you like—it's not as if I were expecting anyone else," I replied.

When she turned up, she still looked pale and had dark shadows under her eyes, but her expression and voice were much brighter and full of life.

"When we first arrived, I was very afraid and on my guard in case Sadakazu tried something," she confided, "but the weather was glorious and it was the weekend, so, although it was never crowded, there were always plenty of people about—I think he had expected it to be much more deserted. But once he had given up the idea of killing me, he couldn't have been nicer. He told me that as it was our first trip together in twelve years we could do anything I wanted. At Okudogo, the people in the hotel thought we were on our real honeymoon.

"I was really happy. Driving around the towns and sightseeing with him, I realized that I wanted it to go on forever, I couldn't face the idea of dying any more. That night at Okudogo, I stayed awake all night trying to think of a plan. And suddenly I had it! It would need a lot of nerve to carry out but I told myself my future happiness was at stake and I managed it."

"What do you mean?"

"I faked it."

"Faked what?"

"At Matsuyama Castle, I told him someone had tried to push me off the wall while he was in the men's room. Of course, nothing had really happened."

"You mean you lied to him?"

"Yes. He was very concerned and searched the area, but couldn't find anyone suspicious. In the end I said it had probably just been a child's prank and we left it at that. Then when we arrived at Cape Ashizuri, I overheard the clerk in the hotel say that the footpaths become deserted as it gets dark. So I suggested to Sadakazu that we go for a walk to look at the sea before dinner." Her voice seemed to rise slightly with excitement.

"When he walked down to the cliff edge to watch the waves, I wandered on along the path beside the cliff edge. I told myself that if I couldn't find a suitable place I would give up and go back to the hotel. But I found the perfect place.

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"There was a ledge about ten feet down from the edge of the cliff. I screwed up my courage and started to climb down, holding onto the scrub that was growing out of the cliff. But the cliff was steeper than I thought and I slipped the last couple of yards, scraping my face and knees—which saved me doing it on purpose.

"It was about a two-hundred-and-fifty-foot drop to the waves and when I looked down I felt quite dizzy. I clung on for dear life and my fear saved me from feeling the cold. About fifteen minutes later, I heard voices and called for help. It was a young couple and they went to call the police. A mountain-rescue policeman came and took me to have my cuts tended to and Sadakazu was called over from the hotel.

"When we were asked if we had any idea who might want to kill me, we both said we couldn't think of anyone. The sergeant seemed to suspect Sadakazu and questioned me about my property and life insurance. Finally they had to let us go, but as we left he warned me to be careful and looked meaningfully at Sadakazu."

"So you mean you lied and set your husband up to look like a murderer?"

"Yes. Now it has come to this, he won't try anything for a while."

"All the same, I admire your courage." I couldn't believe this shy, delicate woman could have performed such a daring feat. She must love Sadakazu very much to be willing to gamble her life in an effort to keep him. I felt a shock of jealousy.

"I just wanted to save him from doing something he might regret later. Even if it means he has to live his life with a miserable wife like me, it's better than having it ruined by a moment's misjudgment."

"Still, you mustn't be too complacent. He may think it's worth the risk, so you should stay on your guard."

"No," she replied fondly. "He's a very careful man. He would never try anything foolish if he thought there was a risk involved."

It was one-fifteen on Saturday the eleventh of December when the Showa police station had a phone call from Sadakazu Saijo saying that his wife had committed suicide. The detectives hurried over to his house, situated in one of the better neighborhoods, and found his wife lying on the floor of the living room with a scarlet cord wrapped around her neck.

Sadakazu explained in a trembling voice that he had come home

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and found her hanging from the crossbeam that separated the living room from an alcove.

"I thought I might be able to save her," he said, "so I got her down, but I have not touched anything else."

It was obvious that Tokiko was dead, so the detective in charge, Assistant Inspector Okada, telephoned the police station to report the death and request a police doctor. He then got his men to start checking the house and had Sadakazu tell him the whole story.

"Today being a Saturday," Sadakazu began, "I slept in until a short while before nine. Tokiko got up a little earlier and we had breakfast together at nine-thirty. After that I went to the golf course, where the local pro gives a lesson from ten to twelve. I am a member of the class and I usually stay to practice my swing until about twelve-thirty, so I get home at one o'clock or so."

When he arrived home and found Tokiko hanging from the beam, he had taken her down and phoned the police straightaway.

"When you left home this morning, did your wife hint that she might try something like this?"

"No, not at all."

"Has she been in low spirits recently?"

"No. She is the type who always seems to have something to worry about, but I have rarely seen her in such good spirits as she has been recently."

"She didn't have any male friends?"

"No, she didn't have many friends at all. She very seldom went out, so she had no opportunity to meet anyone new."

"Forgive me for asking, but has she borrowed any large sums of money recently?"

"Absolutely not. That's out of the question."

No matter what he asked, the detective could find no reason for Tokiko's suicide. His men searched the house, but they could not find a suicide note anywhere.

One of them called Okada over to one side.

"The marks on her neck are not consistent with those usually found in a hanging," he said. "Also, there is clear ecchymosis on the face and eyelids. If she hung herself, the face should be much paler."

The body was taken to a hospital for a complete autopsy. It revealed that Tokiko Saijo had actually been strangled from behind and her body hung from the crossbeam to simulate hanging. The time of death was set at between twelve and one o'clock in the afternoon.

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Once this was confirmed, the police started a full-scale investigation of Sadakazu. They questioned his friends and colleagues and were able to learn several interesting things.

Firstly, the house and land where they lived were in Tokiko's name and she owned three hundred million yen that she had inherited from her parents. Sadakazu had taken out an insurance policy on her which named him as the beneficiary, and as it had a double-indemnity clause he would receive a further two hundred million yen.

Secondly, they learned that he was something of a playboy and had a large number of girl friends. In particular, there was a new hostess at the club near his office that was often used to entertain clients with whom he was said to have a particularly close relationship.

Shigemi Hirokawa was twenty-six years old and had a very good figure. She admitted having an affair with Sadakazu and said he came to her apartment about twice a week. She did not seem to feel guilty about it, and when asked if she had wanted to marry him she merely said she knew he was married and so she had not given it a thought.

And she had a watertight alibi. She had had lunch on Saturday noon with one of the club's clients and the club manageress and both could vouch for her.

The same, however, could not be said for Sadakazu. Although two or three of the staff at the golf club could vouch for his having been there until about twelve twenty-five, it took only about thirty minutes—twenty minutes if he exceeded the speed limit—to get to his house.

On the evening of the twelfth, the police got another lead that made things look even worse for Sadakazu. A woman came to the station and asked to speak to the detective in charge of the case. She said that she had once worked with Tokiko and they had remained friends ever since. She now worked for a beautician not far from the police station. Her name was Noriko Usui.

"The last time I saw Tokiko," she said, "was on the thirtieth of November. She came to tell me about a trip she and her husband made the weekend before."

"You mean they were away together as recently as that?"

"Yes, they took a holiday to celebrate their twelfth wedding anniversary. Before they left, she told me she had had several suspi-

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cious accidents recently and quite frankly I advised her not to go, but she wouldn't listen to me. As I feared, she had a nasty accident, but luckily she got away without serious injury."

"What do you mean by an accident?"

"When she was walking along a footpath at Cape Ashizuri, someone pushed her off the cliff."

"Who?"

"They never found out, but a similar thing happened to her earlier that same day at Matsuyama Castle."

"Did she report it to the police?"

"The couple who discovered her clinging to the ledge at Cape Ashizuri called the police and she was interviewed by a sergeant from the local police station."

"We will get in touch with them and see what they can tell us," Okada said. Gazing into space, he added, "I wonder why Saijo didn't tell us about all this himself."

When news of the two attempts on her life spread around the station, the general opinion was that after he had failed to kill his wife twice during the trip Sadakazu had tried again. This time he had succeeded. He was called to the station every day for interrogation, but no matter how they tried they couldn't get him to admit to anything. As their case rested on wholly circumstantial evidence, they could only try harder and harder to break him.

After three days, the press got hold of the story—and after the case appeared in the newspapers Sadakazu's guilt became an accepted fact among the investigators. However, Okada, alone of all his colleagues, began to think there was something about the case that was not as straightforward as he had originally thought. When the suspect was first investigated, his friends and colleagues had all agreed on one thing: Sadakazu was a very clever, careful man. The fact that he had spent five years building up the amount of insurance on his wife was taken to be proof of this.

However, if this was the case, why had he tried to kill his wife twice during the same trip? Surely if he was a careful man he would have given up after his first attempt and not tried again the same day. It was even more unlikely that he would try again a mere two weeks after he had been interviewed by the police—and if he did, certainly he could find a better way to do it than strangulation made to look like suicide. A careful man would surely have known that the marks left on the body would betray him.

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The fact that he had not mentioned their trip to Shikoku or that his wife had been assaulted had looked very bad to begin with, but on reflection Okada realized that Sadakazu had probably been afraid to tell them anything that would make him appear more suspicious.

It was Saturday the eighteenth of December, a week after Tokiko's death, when I came back to work from my lunch break and found Assistant Inspector Okada on the sofa in the waiting area. He stood, and I recognized him immediately as the man I had spoken with when I went to the police station.

"Good afternoon," he said, fixing me with a piercing gaze. "Okada, from the Showa police station. Thank you for your help the other day."

"Not at all."

"There are a few things I would like to check out with you. It won't take long. Would it be all right to talk here?"

I looked around the salon, and although there were three customers visible inside having their hair done, there was nobody within hearing distance of the semi-enclosed waiting area.

"Yes, of course," I said, and sat down in one of the chairs. He sat back down on the sofa, facing me diagonally.

"You came and informed me about what Mrs. Saijo told you about the attempts on her life during her trip with her husband. Are you sure you didn't leave anything out?"

"What?"

"You are sure she did not tell you the truth about the two incidents in question?"

"The truth?" For a minute I didn't know what to say, but I'm sure I looked suitably confused.

Okada watched me closely for a moment, then leaned forward and said, "I got in touch with the local police as soon as you told me what Mrs. Saijo had told you. I'm afraid it would appear that she made up both of the incidents."

"Made up? But what would she gain by making it all up?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that question. In fact, that is why I came to see you. But you are quite sure she didn't tell you she had made it all up?"

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose that is only to be expected—otherwise you would have mentioned it when we spoke, wouldn't you?"

"I told you everything just as she told it to me."

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"I see." He got to his feet. "Well, I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

He walked away without saying any more.

It was two days later, on Monday afternoon, when he telephoned the salon.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but I don't suppose you could possibly come to the station after you finish work, could you? There's something I'd like you to hear."

"What is it?"

"A tape recording we found in the Saijos' house. We can't be sure if it's Mrs. Saijo's voice or not."

As soon as he mentioned the tape, I remembered suggesting to Tokiko that she record her suspicions about her husband and leave the tape where it would be found, so that if anything happened to her the police would have something to go on. It would appear that she had taken my advice.

That evening I left work early and hurried over to the police station. Okada greeted me in a friendly manner and showed me through to a small office with dim lighting. There was a tape recorder on top of the desk.

"When I discovered that the Shikoku police believed the two incidents there to be fabrications, it occurred to me that she feared her husband for some reason and wanted to make sure that he would be blamed should she die under suspicious circumstances."

I nodded in agreement.

"However, she was basically a very kind person and I wondered if she had not left a letter telling the truth so that her husband would not be blamed for something he had not done. So yesterday we went through the house again with a fine-tooth comb. That's how we came across the tape. It was mixed in with the music tapes, so we didn't notice it the first time we searched. Unfortunately, the sound isn't very good and we would appreciate it if you could confirm that it is in fact Tokiko speaking."

"Of course."

I felt very tense as I sat down in the chair he indicated. Okada pressed the playback button and the voice that came out of the speaker was unmistakably Tokiko's:

"If I should die under suspicious circumstances, Sadakazu is sure to become the prime suspect and be tried in court because of two attempts I reported to have been made on my life during our trip to Ashizuri. However, I hereby declare that both of those incidents

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were total fabrications on my part. My husband is no fool and would never try to murder me if he thought the blame might fall on him. So please do not try him for something that he did not do. As further evidence that this is the truth, I visited my friend, Noriko Usui, after returning to Nagoya and told her in detail how I had faked the incidents. I am sure that she will testify to this in court."

Okada stopped the tape and looked at me sternly. "Is that Tokiko Saijo's voice?"

"Yes." There was no way I could deny it.

"In that case, I'm not sure that I understand. Why is it that you came here to tell us about those two murder attempts but neglected to tell us the whole truth? Even when I pressed you about it two days ago, you denied that Mrs. Saijo had said anything about faking them."

I could think of nothing to answer to this.

"Actually, we thought it rather strange that an intelligent man like Mr. Saijo would commit murder at a time when he was almost certain to become the suspect, so we decided to look into his background even more closely. We discovered that he was a playboy and often had affairs with numerous women at the same time. Take yourself, for instance. Your affair with him started before he married and is still continuing. You pretended to be a friend of Mrs. Saijo while all the time you were trying to persuade her husband to divorce her and settle down with you. However, when he showed no sign of doing so, you decided to kill her and have him for yourself."

I tried to deny it, but I couldn't speak. It was just as Okada said. I had dated Sadakazu since I joined the company, but he chose the quiet rich girl rather than me. After they married, he came and visited me a couple of times a month. I knew that he was dating other women as well, but when he was tired or had some trouble at work he always came to me. He needed me when he was in trouble and I helped him as no one else could.

However, recently I had come to realize that I couldn't compete with Tokiko. She was the kind of helpless, weak woman men like to protect and look after. I knew that all her talk of his trying to kill her had been nothing but her imagination.

On Saturday I decided to pay her a visit and see how she had settled down after her trip. She lived only a brisk ten-minute walk from the salon, so I went during my lunch break. She looked radiant and was satisfied that Sadakazu would no longer try to kill her. She was so happy that I was seized by a fit of jealousy. While she was

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in the kitchen making some tea, I went to the chest of drawers where she kept her kimonos and took out a thick cord that was used to tie the obi. When she came back, I pretended to be studying a picture hanging near an alcove.

"What's this here?" I asked, pointing to the bottom left corner. When she came to look at it, I strangled her from behind. When she stopped moving, I used the same cord to hang her from the cross-beam. She was very light and it was no trouble for me to lift her up. I knew an autopsy would probably prove that she had been strangled, but in that case Sadakazu would be blamed. Tokiko had seen to that for me.

Things turned out as I had hoped, and when Sadakazu telephoned me I had been encouraging—"No matter what the police say, don't admit anything. They haven't any real evidence as long as you don't say anything."

Even if he was arrested and taken to court, he would be set free one day and I was prepared to wait. If society thought he was a murderer and he was thrown out of work, he was sure to come to me—there was nowhere else for him to go. It was at times like that, when he was at his lowest, that he needed me the most.

"If Saijo was found innocent," Okada said, bringing me back to reality, "he would inherit all of his wife's property as well as the insurance he had taken out on her. You would manage to steal not only her husband but her money as well. You made no secret of the fact that you wanted to open your own beauty salon."

I knew that if I just denied everything the police could do nothing. They had no evidence. All I had to do was deny it. But no matter how many times I repeated this to myself, my throat seemed paralyzed and I could not speak. All I could think of was Tokiko. She had recorded that tape to try and protect Sadakazu, even if she was killed by him, and I knew that I could not hope to compete with a woman like that.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

BRENDAN DuBOIS

"We're trapped here, Monroe," Brad said. "All we got here is Boston Falls, the Mohawk Cinema, Main Street—and the Wentworth Shopping Plaza ten miles away. And a lot of brick and smoke and trees and hills. Here, straight As and straight Fs will get you the same thing."

"I know. The lumberyard or Parker or Devon Shoe."

"Or maybe a store or a gas station. We're too smart for that, damn it."

"And we're too broke for college."

"That we are," Brad said, resting his head on his knees and thinking . . .

A TICKET OUT

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

Then there are the nights when I can't sleep, when the blankets seem wrapped around me too tight, when the room is so stuffy that I imagine the air is full of dust and age, and when my wife Carol's sighs and breathing are enough to make me tremble with tension. On these nights I slip out of bed and put on my heavy flannel bathrobe, and in bare feet I pad down the hallway—past the twins' bedroom—and go downstairs to the kitchen. I'm smart enough to know that drinking at night will eventually cause problems, but I ignore what my doctor tells me and I mix a ginger and Jameson's in a tall glass and go to the living room and look out the large bay window at the stars and the woods and the hills. Remembering what we had planned, what we had stolen, the blood that had been spilled, the tears and the anguish, I sip at my drink and think, well, it

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wasn't what we wanted to do. We weren't stealing for drugs or clothes or to impress the chunky, giggly girls Brad and I went to high school with. We were stealing for a ticket, for a way out. In the end, only one of us got out. That thought doesn't help me sleep at all.

It began on an August day in 1976, about a month before Brad Leary and I were going in as seniors to our high school. That summer we worked at one of the shoe mills in Boston Falls, keeping a tradition going in each of our families. Brad's father worked in one of the stitching rooms at Devon Shoe while my dad and two older brothers worked on the other side of the Squamscott River at Parker Shoe. My dad was an assistant bookkeeper, which meant he wore a shirt and tie and earned fifty cents more an hour than the "blue-collar boys" that worked among the grinding and dirty machinery.

Brad and I worked in the packing room, piling up cardboard boxes of shoes and dodging the kicks and punches from the older men who thought we were moving too slow or too sloppily. We usually got off at three, and after buying a couple of cans of 7-Up or Coke and a bag of Humpty Dumpty potato chips we biked away from the mills up Mast Road to the top of Cavalry Hill, which looked over the valley where Boston Falls was nestled. Well, maybe nestled's too nice a word. It was more tumbled in than nestled in.

On that day, we both wore the standard uniform of the summer, dark-green T-shirts, bluejeans, and sneakers. We were on an exposed part of the hill, past the town cemetery, looking down at the dirty red-brick mill buildings with the tiny windows that rose straight up from both sides of the Squamscott River. Steam and smoke fumes boiled away from tall brick stacks and neither of us really had gotten used to the pungent, oily smell that seemed to stay right in the back of the throat. The old timers never mind the smell. They sniff and say, "Aah," and say, "Boys, that's the smell of money." We weren't so dumb that we didn't know if Devon Shoe and Parker Shoe and the lumberyard shut down, Boston Falls would crumple away like a fall leaf in November.

But Brad never liked the smell.

"God," he said, popping open his can of soda. "It seems worse today."

"Wind's out of the south," I replied. "Can't be helped."

Our bikes were on their sides in the tall grass. There was a low buzz of insects and Brad took a long swallow from his soda, water beading up on the side of the can. It was a hot day. Brad's long hair

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was combed over to one side in a long swoop and I was jealous of him because my dad made me keep my hair about two inches long, with no sideburns. But then again, Brad wore thick glasses and my vision was perfect.

"Brad," I said, "we're in trouble."

He tossed his empty soda can over his shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"With the sixty from last week, I got four hundred and twelve."

"Idiot. You should have four hundred and fifteen like me. Where's the other three?"

"I had to buy a dress shirt for Aunt Sara's funeral last week. I tore my last good one in June and Mom's been bugging me."

"Mothers." Brad hunched forward and rested his chin on his knee.

"State says we need at least a thousand for the first year."

"Yeah."

"And we can't get part-time jobs this winter, there won't be any around."

"Yeah."

"So what do we do?"

"I'm thinking. Shut up, will you?"

I let it slide, knowing what he was thinking. We were both six hundred dollars' short for the first-year tuition at the state college. My dad had made some brave noises about helping out when the time came, but six months ago my oldest brother Tom had wrapped his '68 Chevy around a telephone pole and now he was wired up to a bed in a hospital in Hanover and my parents' bank account was shrinking every month. But at least my father had offered to help. Brad's father usually came home drunk from the mill every night, sour-mad and spoiling for a fight. I'd slept over Brad's house only once, when we were both fourteen and had just become friends. It was a Friday night and by midnight Brad's father and mother were screaming and swinging at each other with kitchen knives. Brad and I snuck out to the backyard with our blankets and pillows and we never talked about it again. But one day Brad came to school with his face lumpy and swollen from bruises, and I knew he must have told his father he wanted to go to college.

"Monroe," he said, finally speaking up.

"Go ahead."

"We're special people, aren't we?"

"Hunh?"

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"I mean, compared to the rest of the kids at school, we're special, right? Who's at the top of the class? You and me, right?"

"Right."

"So we're special, we're better than they are."

"Oh, c'mon—"

"Face it, Monroe. Just sit there and face it, will you? That's all I ask right now. Just face it."

Well, he was somewhat right, but then you have to understand our regional high school, Squamscott High. Kids from Boston Falls, Machias, and Albion go there, and those other towns are no better off than ours. And in our state there's little aid for schools, so the towns have to pay the salaries and supplies. Which means a school building with crumbling plaster ceilings. Which means history books that talk about the promise of the Kennedy administration and science books that predict man will go into space one day. Which means teachers like Mr. Hensely, who stumbles into his afternoon history classes, his breath reeking of mouthwash, and Miss Tierney, the English teacher, not long out of college, who also works Saturday and Sunday mornings as a waitress at Mona's Diner on Front Street.

"All right, Brad," I said. "I guess we're special. We study hard and get good marks. We like books and we want to go places."

"But we're trapped here, Monroe," he said. "All we got here is Boston Falls, the Mohawk Cinema, Main Street—and the Wentworth Shopping Plaza ten miles away. And a lot of brick and smoke and trees and hills. Here, straight As and straight Fs will get you the same thing."

"I know. The lumberyard or Parker or Devon Shoe."

"Or maybe a store or a gas station. We're too smart for that, damn it."

"And we're too broke for college."

"That we are," he said, resting his head on his knees. "That we are."

He remained silent for a while, a trait of Brad's. We'd been friends since freshman year, when we were the only two students who were interested in joining the debate team—which lasted a week because no one else wanted to join. We shared a love of books and a desire to go to college, but no matter how many hours we spent together there was always a dark bit of Brad I could never reach or understand. It wasn't something dramatic or apparent, just small things. Like his bedroom. Mine had the usual posters of cars and rocketships and warplanes, but his had only one picture—a framed pho-

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tograph of Joseph Stalin. I was pretty sure no one else in Brad's family recognized the picture—I got the feeling he told his father the man had been a famous scientist.When I asked Brad why Stalin of all people, he said, "The man had drive, Monroe. He grew up in a peasant society and grabbed his ticket. Look where it took him."

Brad wanted to become a lawyer and I wanted to write history books.

"Feel it," he said, his voice low, rocking back and forth. "Feel how it's strangling us?"

I felt it. If we didn't go to State, then next summer we'd be on that slippery slope where we couldn't get off, a life at the mill, a life of praying and hoping for a nickel-an-hour wage increase, of waiting for the five o'clock whistle. A life where we would find our friends and amusement at the Legion Hall, Drake's Pub, or Pete's Saloon, where we would sit comfortable on the bar stools, swapping stories about who scored what winning touchdown at what state tournament, sipping our beers and feeling ourselves and our tongues getting thick with age and fear. Just getting along, getting older and slower, the old report cards with the perfect marks hidden away in some desk drawer, buried under old bills, a marriage certificate, and insurance policies.

"We gotta get out," I said.

"We do. And I know how." Brad had gotten to his feet, brushing potato-chip crumbs from his pants. "Monroe, we're going to become thieves."

The next day we were at Outland Rock, tossing pebbles into the river. We were upstream from the mills and the waters flowed fast and clean. About another mile south, after the river passed through town, the waters were slow and slate-grey, clogged with chemical foam and wood chips and scraps of leather. Outland Rock was a large boulder that hung over the river bank. We were too lazy to swim, so we sat and tossed pebbles into the river, watching the wide arcs of the ripples rise up and fade away.

"What are we going to steal?" I asked. "Gold? Diamonds? The bank president's Cadillac?"

Brad was on his stomach, his feet heading up to the bank, his head over the water. "Don't screw wth me, Monroe. I'm serious."

I shook my head, tossing another rock in. "Okay, so you're serious. Answer the question."

"Cash." He had a stick in his hand, a broken piece of pine, and

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he stirred it in the water like he was casting for something. "Anything else can be traced. We steal cash and we're set."

The day was warm and maybe it was the lazy August mood I was in—the comfortable, hazy feeling that the day would last forever and school and September would never come—but I decided to go along with him.

"Okay, cash. But you gotta realize what we're working with."

He looked up at me, his eyes unblinking behind the thick glasses. "Go ahead, Monroe."

"Our parents still won't let us drive by ourselves, so we're stuck with our bikes. Unless you want to steal a car to get out of town—which doubles the danger. So whatever we go after has to be in Boston Falls."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"There's another thing," I said. "We can't go into the National Bank or Trussen's Jewelers in broad daylight and rob 'em. In an hour they'd be looking for two kids our age and they wouldn't have a hard time tracking us down." I lay back on the rock, the surface warm against my back, and closed my eyes, listening to some birds on the other side of the river and the swish-swish as Brad moved the stick back and forth in the water.

"Burglary," he said. I sat up, shading my face with one hand. "Burglary?"

"Yeah. We find someone who's got a lot of cash and break into their house. Do it when no one's home and they'll blame it on some drifters or something."

Somewhere a dog barked. "Do you realize we're actually talking about stealing, Brad? Not only is it a crime, but it's wrong. Are you thinking about that?"

He turned to me and his face changed—I had the strange feeling I knew what he'd look like in ten years.

"Don't get soft on me, Monroe. In another three weeks we'll be back at school. If we don't get more money this summer we're done for. 'Wrong.' Isn't it wrong that you and me have to grow up in a place like this? Isn't it wrong that we have to live alongside people who haven't read a book in years? Don't you think it's wrong that for lack of a few measly bucks we have to rot here?"

He bent over the rock and pointed. "Look." In the shallow water I saw a nesting of mussels, their shells wide open. "There you have," he continued, "the population of Boston Falls, New Hampshire. Sitting still, dumb and happy and open, letting everything go by them,

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ready to snap at anything that comes within reach." He pushed his stick into one of the mussels and it snapped shut against the wood. He pulled the stick out, the mussel hanging onto the stick, dripping water. "See how they grab the first thing that comes their way?"

He slammed the end of the stick onto the rock and the mussel exploded into black shards.

"We're not going to grab the first thing that comes our way, Monroe. We're going to plan and get the hell out of here. That will take cash, and if that means stealing from the fat, dumb mussels in this town, that's what we'll do."

On the ride home, Brad slowed and stopped and I pulled my rusty five-speed up next to him. A thick bank of rolling grey clouds over the hills promised a thunderstorm soon. Our T-shirts were off and tied around our waists. I was tanned from working in our garden all summer but Brad was thin and white, and his chest was a bit sunken, like he'd been punched hard there and never recovered.

"Look there," he said. I did and my stomach tightened up.

A dead woodchuck was in the middle of the road, its legs stiff. Two large black grackles hopped around the swollen brown body, their sharp beaks at work.

"So it's a burglary," I said. "Whose house?"

He shrugged his bony shoulders. "I'll find the right one. I'll go roaming."

Roaming. It was one of Brad's favorite things to do. At night, after everyone at his house was asleep, he would sneak out and roam around the dark streets and empty back yards of Boston Falls. The one time I'd gone with him, I thought he was just being a Peeping Tom or something, but it wasn't that simple. He just liked watching what people did, I think, and he moved silently from one lighted window to another. I didn't like it at all. I wasn't comfortable out on the streets or in the fields at night and I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was trespassing.

Brad rolled his bike closer to the dead woodchuck. "Are you in, Monroe? We're running out of time."

Thunder boomed from the hills and I glanced up and saw a flash of lightning. "We better get going if we're going to beat the storm."

"I said, are you with me?"

The wind shifted, blowing the leaves on the trees in great gusts. "Brad, we gotta get moving."

"You get moving," he said, his lips tense. "You get moving wherever you're going. I'm staying here for a bit."

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I pedaled away as fast as I could, pumping my legs up and down, thinking, I'll save a bit here and there, maybe deliver some papers, maybe just work an extra summer—there's got to be another way to get the money.

A week later. Suppertime at my house. My brothers Jim and Henry had eaten early and gone out, leaving me alone with my parents. My brother Tom was still in the hospital in Hanover. My parents visited him every Saturday and Sunday, bringing me along when I wasn't smart enough to leave the house early. I guess you could say I loved my brother, but the curled over, thin figure with wires and tubes in the noisy hospital ward didn't seem to be him any more.

We sat in the kitchen, a plastic tablecloth on the table, my mother, looking worn and tired, still wearing her apron. My dad wore his shirt and tie. His crewcut looked sweaty and he smelled of the mill. On his right shirt pocket was a plastic pen holder that said Parker Does It Right with four pens. Supper was fried baloney, leftover mashed potatoes, and canned yellow string beans. I tried to talk about what went on at the mill that day—a pile of boxes stuffed full of leather hiking boots had fallen and almost hit me—but my parents nodded and said nothing and I finally concentrated on quietly cleaning my plate. The fried baloney left a puddle of grease that flowed into the lumpy white potatoes.

My father looked over at Mom and she hung her head, and he seemed to shrug his shoulders before he said, "Monroe?"

"Yes?"

He put his knife and fork down and folded his hands, as if we were suddenly in church.

"At work today they announced a cutback." He looked at me and then looked away, as if someone had walked past the kitchen window. "Some people are being laid off and the rest of us are having a pay cut."

"Oh." The baloney and potatoes were now very cold.

"Tom is still very sick, and until he—gets better, we still have to pay the bills. With the cutback—well, Monroe, we need the money you've saved."

I looked at my mother, but she didn't look up. "Oh," I said, feeling dumb, feeling blank.

"I know you've got your heart set on college, but this is a family

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emergency—that has to come first, a family has to stick together. Jim and Henry have agreed to help—"

"With what?" I said, clenching my knife and fork tight. "They don't save anything at all."

"No, but they're giving up part of their paychecks. All we ask is that you do your part."

Then Mom spoke up. "There's always next year," she said. "Not all of your friends are going to college, are they? You'll be with them next summer."

Dad gave me a weak smile. "Besides, I never went to college, and I'm doing all right. Monroe, it's just temporary, until things improve with Tom."

Until he gets better or until he dies, I thought. I didn't know what to say next, so I finished eating and went down the hallway to my bedroom and got the dark-brown passbook from First Merchants of Boston Falls and brought it back and gave it to my father.

Back in my bedroom, I lay on the bed, staring up at the models of airplanes and rocketships hanging from thin black threads attached to the ceiling. I looked at my textbooks and other books on the bookshelves I made myself. I curled up and didn't think of much at all and after a while I fell asleep.

There was a tapping at my window and I threw the top sheet off and went over, lifting up the window screen. I stood there in my shorts, looking at Brad on the back lawn. My glow-in-the-dark clock said it was two in the morning.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"I found it," he whispered back, leaning forward so his head was almost through the open window. "I found the place."

"Whose house is it?"

"Mike Willard's."

"Mike? The ex-marine?"

"That's right," Brad said. "I've watched him two nights in a row. He goes into his bedroom and underneath his bed he's got this little strongbox—before shutting off the light and going to bed he opens it up and goes through it. Monroe, he's got tons of money in there. Wads as big as your fist."

"You saw it?"

"Of course I did. I was in a tree in his yard. He must've been saving up all his life. You never saw so much money."

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The night air was warm but goosebumps traveled up and down my arms. "How do we do it?"

"Easy. He lives out on Tanner Avenue. We can get to it by cutting through the woods. His house has hedges all around. It'll be a cinch."

I chewed on my lip. "When?" I asked.

Brad grinned at me. I could almost smell the sense of excitement. "Tomorrow. It's Saturday—your parents will be in Hanover and Mike goes to the Legion Hall every afternoon. We'll do it while he's there."

I didn't argue. "Fine," I said.

The next afternoon we were in a stand of trees facing a well mowed back yard. Tall green hedges flanked both sides of the yard and the two-story white house with the tall gables was quiet. Beside me, Brad was hunched over, peering around a tree trunk. We heard a door slam and saw Mike Willard walk down his drive and down the street. His posture was straight as a pine, his white hair cut in a crewcut.

"Let's give him a few minutes," Brad said. "Make sure he didn't forget anything."

I nodded. My heart was pounding so hard I wondered if Brad could hear it. I knew what we were doing was wrong, I knew it wouldn't be right to steal Mike Willard's money, but money was all I could think of. Wads as big as my fist, Brad had said.

"Go time," Brad said, and he set off across the yard. I followed. There were no toys or picnic tables or barbecue sets in Mike Willard's back yard, just a fine lawn, as if he mowed it every other day. Up on the back porch I had the strange feeling we should knock or something. I was scared Mike would come back and yell, "Boys, what the hell do you want?" or that a mailman would walk up the drive and ask if Mike was home. I almost hoped a mailman would come, but Brad picked up a rock and went to the door and it was too late. He smashed a pane of glass—the sound was so loud it seemed like every police cruiser within miles would be sent around—then he reached in and unlocked the door, motioning me to follow him inside. A small voice told me to stay outside and let him go in alone, but I followed him into the kitchen, my sneakers crunching on the glass.

The kitchen smelled clean and everything was shiny and still. There weren't even any dishes in the sink.

"God, look how clean it is," I said.

"Tell me about it. My mom should keep our house so clean."

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The kitchen table was small and square, with only two chairs. There was one placemat out, a blue woven thing with stars and anchors, and I thought of Mike Willard coming home every night to this empty house, opening a can of spaghetti maybe and eating alone at his table. I looked at Brad and wanted to say, 'Come on, let's not do it,' because I got a bad feeling at the thought of Mike coming home and finding he'd been robbed, that someone had been in his house, but Brad looked at me hard and I followed him down the hallway.

The bedroom was small and cramped, with neatly labeled cardboard boxes piled on one side of the room and a long bureau on the other, on the other side of the bed. The labels on the boxes read CHINA 34, IWO 45, OCC., and things like that. Brad pointed at the walls, where pictures and other items were hanging. "Look, there's Mike there, I think. I wonder where it was taken. Guadalcanal, maybe?"

The faded black-and-white picture showed a group of young men standing in a jungle clearing, tired-looking, in uniforms and beards, holding rifles and automatic weapons. There was no name on the picture but I recognized a younger Mike Willard, hair short and ears sticking out, standing off to one side.

I heard a board creak. "Shh!" I said. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah. This is an old house, Monroe."

"Well, let's get going," I said, rubbing my palms against my jeans. They were very sweaty.

"What's the rush?" Brad said, his eyes laughing at me from behind his glasses. "Old Mike's down at the Legion, telling the boys how he won the big one back in 'forty-five. Look here."

Below an American flag and a furled Japanese flag was a sheathed curved sword resting on two wooden pegs. Brad took it down and slid it out of its scabbard. He ran a thumb across the blade and took a few swings through the air. "I wonder if Mike bought it or got it off some dead Jap."

By now I was glancing out the window, wondering if anyone could see us. Brad put the sword down and climbed onto the bed. "Hold on a sec," he said.

The bed was a brown four-poster. Brad reached under the pillows and pulled out a handgun, large and oily-looking. "A forty-five. Can you believe it? Old Mike sleeps with a forty-five under his pillow."

"Brad, stop fooling around," I said. "Let's get the box and go." But I could tell he was enjoying himself too much.

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"Hold it, I just want to see if it works." He moved his hand across the top of the gun and part of it slid back and forth with a loud click-clack. "There," he said. "Just call me John Wayne. This sucker's ready to fire. I might take it with me when we leave."

He took the gun and stuck it in his waistband, then reached over and pulled a dull-grey strongbox with a simple clasp lock from under the bed. My mouth felt dry and suddenly I was no longer nervous. I was thinking of all the money.

Brad rubbed his hands across the box. "Look, partner. In here's our ticket out."

Then Mike Willard was at the bedroom door, his face red, and I could smell the beer from where I was standing, almost five feet away. "You!" he roared. "What the hell are you doing in here? I'm gonna beat the crap out of you, boys!"

I backstepped quickly, tripping over the cardboard boxes and falling flat on my butt, wondering what to do next, wondering what I could say. Brad scampered across the other side of the bed, pulling out the gun and saying in a squeaky voice, "Hold it." Mike Willard swore and took two large steps, grabbing the sword and swinging it at Brad. I closed my eyes and there was a loud boom that jarred my teeth. There was a crash and an awful grunt, and another crash, then a sharp scent of smoke that seemed to cut right through me.

When I opened my eyes, Brad was sitting across from me, the gun in his lap, both of his hands pressed against his neck. He was very pale and his glasses had been knocked off—without them he looked five years younger.

"It hurts," he said. And then I saw the bright redness seep through his fingers and trickle down his bare arms.

"God," I breathed.

"I can't see," he said. "Where's Mike?"

I got up, weaving slightly, and saw Mike's feet sticking out from the other side of the bed. I crawled across the bed and peered over. Mike was on his back, his arms splayed out, his mouth open like he was still trying to yell, but his eyes were closed and there was a blossom of red spreading across his green workshirt. I stared at him for what seemed hours but his chest didn't move. When I looked up, Brad was resting his back against the bed. Both of his arms were soaked red and I gazed at him, almost fascinated by the flow of blood down his thin wrists. His face was now the color of chalk.

"Wait, I'll get a towel," I said.

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"No, you idiot. If I take my hands away, I'm dead. An artery's gone. Listen. Take the box and call an ambulance."

"I think Mike's dead, Brad."

"Shut up," he said, his teeth clenched. "Just grab the box, hide it, and get help! We're juveniles—nothing's going to happen to us! Get going!" I grabbed the box and was out of the house, running through the woods, the strongbox tight against my chest. The air was fresh and smelled wonderful, and I ran all the way home.

Three days later Mike Willard was buried with full military honors and a Marine Corps honor guard at Cavalry Hill Cemetery. I learned from his front-page obituary that his wife died five years earlier and he had a daughter who lived in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. I also learned that Mike had been in the Marines since he was seventeen, stationed in China in the 1930s and in the Pacific in the 1940s, island-hopping, fighting the Japanese. Then after occupation duty and a year in Korea, he pulled embassy duty until he retired. His nickname had been Golden Mike, for in all his years on active duty he'd never been wounded, never been shot or scratched by shrapnel. The newspaper said he'd come home early that day to dig out a magazine clipping to show some friends at the Legion Hall. To settle a bet.

I kept the strongbox hidden in the attic. Despite the temptation and the worries and the urging, I didn't open it until that day in May after my college acceptance letter came, followed by a bill for the first year's tuition. Then I went up with a chisel and hammer and broke open the lock. The wads of money were in there, just as Brad had said, thick as my fist. They were buried under piles of fragile, yellowed letters, some newspaper and magazine clippings, and a few medals. The money was banded together by string, and in the dim light of the attic I wasn't sure of what I had. I bicycled over to Machias, to a coin shop, and the owner peered over his half-glasses and looked up at me, the money spread over his display case.

"Interesting samples," he said. He wore a dark-green sweater and his hair was white. "Where did you get them?"

"From my uncle," I lied. "Can you tell me what they're worth?"

"Hmm," he said, lifting the bills up to the light. "Nineteen thirties, it looks like. What you have here is Chinese money from that time, what old soldiers and sailors called 'LC,' or local currency. It varied from province to province, and I'd say this is some of it."

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He put the bills back on the counter. "Practically worthless," he said. I thanked him and rode back to Boston Falls. That afternoon I burned some of the paper money along with my acceptance letter and tuition bill. I didn't go to college that fall and ended up never going at all.

My ginger and Jameson is gone and I continue looking out at the stars, watching the moon rise over the hill, Cavalry Hill. And even though it's miles away, I imagine I can see the white stone markers up there, marking so many graves.

In the end I stayed in Boston Falls and took a job at a bank. I worked a little and now I'm an assistant branch manager. Some years ago I married Carol, a teller I helped train, and now we're out of Boston Falls, in Machias. It's just over the line, but I get some satisfaction from getting that far.

Upstairs I still have the old strongbox with some of the money, and though I don't look at it all that often I feel like I have to have something, something I can tell myself I got from that day we broke into Mike Willard's house. I have to have something to justify what we did, and what I did. Especially what I did.

After running all that distance home, I stashed the strongbox in the attic, and as I came downstairs my parents came home. Dad patted me on the back and Mom started supper and I thought of the strongbox upstairs and the blood and the acrid smoke and Mike Willard on his back and Brad holding onto his neck like that. I knew no one had seen me. Mom offered me some lemonade and I took it and went to the living room and watched television with my dad, cheering on the Red Sox as they beat the Yankees—all the while waiting and waiting, until finally the sirens went by.

Brad was buried about a hundred feet from Mike Willard a day later. On the day of his funeral, I said I was sick and stayed home, curled up in a ball on my bed, not thinking, not doing anything, just knowing that I had the box and the money.

I put down my empty glass and open the back door, hoping the fresh air will clear my head so I can go back upstairs and try to sleep. Outside there's a slight breeze blowing in from Boston Falls, and like so many other nights I go down the porch steps and stand with my bare feet cool on the grass, the breeze on my face bringing with it the stench of the mills from Boston Falls. The smell always seems to stick in the back of my throat, and no matter how hard I try I can never get the taste of it out.

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PLAYING WITH MURDER
by Matthew J. Costello

I don't know about you, but there have been times I've been reading a mystery when I wished I could give the sleuth just a tiny bit of help—perhaps pointing out a suspicious character that could do with some clever questioning, or maybe suggesting checking a room on the second floor for the elusive murder weapon. Of course, I'd probably be poking around the parlor bothering innocent people while a Travis McGee or Nero Wolfe had the whole mystery neatly disposed of. Now, for the moments when you feel like tackling detective work, there's a variety of intriguing mystery games that will let you exercise your deductive faculties.

INFOCOM offers a number of challenging computer games with a mystery theme. These text adventures let players actually investigate—examining objects, asking questions, and moving on to new locations. At their best text adventures are absorbing games to play, and INFOCOM's are of consistently high quality.

Ballyhoo (INFOCOM Inc., 125 Cambridge Park Drive, Cambridge, MA 02140; $39.95) is an unusual mystery adventure set at a circus. In the game, you linger near the big top after a show one night and learn that the owner's daughter has been kidnaped. Before long you find yourself playing cards with the midway carnies or attempting dangerous stunts in the now deserted big top. Ballyhoo is rich in atmosphere, with colorful circus folk and actual circus lingo. It comes packaged with a circus program, a balloon, and your ticket to the sideshow.

Moonmist (INFOCOM Inc.; $39.95) features a gothic castle, a missing friend, and a valuable treasure in an entertaining, introductory-level mystery. Riddles and puzzles abound and there are four different game variations contained in the same disk.

Slightly different from the text adventure are graphic adventures that feature both text and picture. An exciting example of this computer mystery game is *Borrowed Time* (Activision, P.O. Box 7187, Mountain view, CA 94039; $29.95). In this game you are a down-on-your-luck gumshoe called in to help a damsel in distress in some messy dispute over money. You can see the private eye's office, his shoes on his desk, and the phone that jingles when it rings. The player can perform actions like moving and answering the phone, as well as examining evidence and talking to characters. As you move to a new location, the picture on the screen changes. And in *Borrowed Time* you better start moving quickly because some hit men are on your trail almost from the moment the game begins. The game starts, quite literally, with a bang.

No computer readily available? No fear, there are a host of games you can easily play by candlelight. *Gumshoe* (Sleuth Publications Ltd., 689

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Florida Street, San Francisco, CA 94110; $35.00) is Sleuth's follow-up to its very successful *Sherlock Holmes—Consulting Detective*. Players take the role of a gumshoe in the golden age of P.I.'s, circa 1930. They read a case and then begin investigating, using white- and yellow-page telephone directories (listing people you can actually go investigate), an extensive fingerprint file, mug shots, and an autopsy report.

A similar game, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Game* (Mayfair Games Inc., P.O. Box 48539, Niles, IL 60648-0539; $17.00) offers clever mysteries that take place either in New York City or the fictional town of Bromlee Station. This game is filled with intriguing material. There's a glossy two-sided game board, a directory of locations for New York City and Bromlee Station, a hefty casebook, and cards picturing a variety of detectives.

Detectives can move to any numbered location on the board (there are hundreds), and then check a clue index for the mystery they're working on. That tells them whether they learn anything or not by directing them to a number in the casebook. All the detectives have special areas of expertise as well as contacts who can provide additional information. While players can try to be the first to solve the mystery, the game seems to work best as a cooperative venture. The writing of the mysteries is entertainingly misleading, with more than enough red herrings to give the investigation flavor.

Mystery parties (and weekends, trains, cruises, and whatnot) have become very popular. Most provide a mystery to be solved with the guest role-playing suspects. Perhaps the easiest way to sample this type of game is TSR's Party Zone game, the *Inheritance* (TSR, P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI 53147-0756; $19.95). Here, TSR provides everything you need for the party—invitations, cocktail napkins, and a party planner which includes a checklist and hints to make the party run smoothly.

With its heady atmosphere of big money at stake, it also comes with mystery-related trivia questions and a wall poster that starts guests sleuthing right away.

There's a wide variety of other mystery-party games to select from, including *The Coffee House Murders* (Just Games, 133 Meadowbrook Road, Garden City, NY 11530; $20.00) and *How To Host a Murder* (Intuitive Marketing, P.O. Box 56, Norfolk, VA 23501; $25.00).

Role-playing games have become a phenomenon in the game world, and there are a number of good mystery role-playing games available. *Mercenaries, Spies, and Private Eyes* (Sleuth Publications Ltd,; $25.00) is a lovingly detailed recreation of everything from the pulp stories of the 'thirties to contemporary high-tech espionage novels. The game provides information on designing characters, developing skills, and, in an especially well done section, how to create an adventure.

Though the recent James Bond films are about as removed from reality as they can be, *James Bond 007* (Victory Games, 43 West 33rd Street, New York, NY 10001; $12.95) can provide an exciting adventure in the glamorous

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world of agents licensed to kill. The game design here is excellent, covering all the necessary pyrotechnics as well as how to mix a martini and seduce a Russian spy. *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium Inc., P.O. Box 6302, Albany, CA 94706; $19.95), on the other hand, has a distinctly darker allure. This role-playing game has investigators looking into mysteries that are, to say the least, not quite normal. The players are in the world of H. P. Lovecraft. Mystery abounds, but players are more likely to face a room-sized creature with tentacles than a Smith & Wesson .32.

Traditional board games continue to be popular, and there are many intriguing mystery games available. *221B Baker Street* (John Hansen, 369 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030; $14.95) demands that players use logic, intuition, and puzzle-solving ability to find clues to a properly Holmesian mystery. Players move around the board, visiting 14 different locations, where they will find, perhaps, some pertinent clues to the mystery at hand. The game comes with 20 cases, and additional case sets are available.

Sleuth (The Avalon Hill Game Company, 4517 Harford Road, Baltimore, MD 21214; $8.00) is another game which requires logic. One card is removed from a deck of 36 depicting different combinations of a gemstone, color, and setting. Players must identify the missing card by asking questions of each other about the cards they hold. As in the classic *Clue*, players may have to show a questioner the type of card he or she holds, and through the process of elimination a player can attempt to identify the missing card.

But the champ of new mystery games is *VCR Clue* (Parker Brothers Inc., 50 Dunham Road, Beverly, MA 01915; about $39.00).

VCR Clue is a highly entertaining game, and so far the one VCR game to make creative use of the videotape. The tape provides three mysteries, which can be used for five games, and each game is a full evening's play. All the suspicious characters remembered from the board version of the game come to life (now you can actually see Mr. Green attempt to murder Mrs. White with the candlestick in the kitchen). Logic and card-play take equal roles in *VCR Clue,* and each stab at a solution could find you out of the game, fetching the popcorn.

So if you find yourself a bit itchy to do more than read mysteries, resist the temptation to hang around your local police department. Murder and mayhem aplenty await you in these wonderfully mysterious games.

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Ed. Note: Allen J. Hubin's The Jury Box will return in the February issue.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"It must be a hectic business, Stace." Brian Taggart was standing with Stacey Berenson not far from pounding breakers, watching gulls hanging on the wind.

"I assembled ten of the greatest jazz players in a studio," Berenson said. "I put them at their ease, I let them play. I kept the cameras out of the way, nothing obtrusive. Brilliant. It was so good and so easy and I won an Emmy. Now I produce a crazy situation comedy and make tons of money and I hate it . . ."

THE BODY IN THE CAR

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Taggart saw Coral Berenson moving around the kitchen with a mug of coffee clutched to the collar of her robe and called from the converted pantry he insisted on using for a workroom, "Coral, honey, have you seen page 194 of my book?"

"Brian, I haven't." She came and stood in the doorway. He had a typewritten page in either hand. The table held a neat stack of pages beside his typewriter. "Have you asked Stacey?"

"No, but I will."

Stacey Berenson had been carousing last night in Malibu with the writers of his television sit-com. It was after three in the morning when he drove up the hill to Pacific Palisades and got to bed. The famous TV producer wouldn't put in an appearance for hours.

"Can I ask you a question?" Coral lowered herself onto an upholstered stool. She was a slightly overweight woman with smooth legs. Taggart thought she was one of the greatest things since night baseball. He liked the way she would present her face with this innocent, nine-years-old expression on it and say, "Can I ask you a

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question?" It always meant a few minutes of intense, interesting talk.

"Shoot," he said, putting the missing page of manuscript out of his mind.

"What's the matter with Stacey? Funny for me to ask *you* that—I've been his wife for twenty-four years—but he's always been partly a mystery to me. He was already famous when I met him in New York. He'd won his Emmy for the jazz special. He was playing the role of the impressario. Now here you are, his old school buddy from Baytown. You remember him when." Coral appealed to Taggart with a penetrating stare. Some of her facial expressions were theatrical. She was the daughter of the Hollywood character actor, Steve Comax, who played mainly heavies. "What's going on with him, Brian?"

Taggart didn't want to bite the hand that was providing free room and board. "You're right," he said, "I knew Stacey in the old days. In fact, that's what my novel is about—small-town Ontario kids growing up after the war. But I've been so busy working I haven't had time to observe him here and now."

This was not true. Only yesterday, Berenson and Taggart had driven down to the beach for a drink at Gladstone's, had stood not far from pounding breakers, watching gulls hanging on the wind. "Every day I do the same thing," Berenson had said. "Do you know what I do, Brian? I argue with people. Three meetings in the morning, five in the afternoon. And telephone calls all the time, like hallucinations."

"It must be a hectic business, Stace."

"I assembled ten of the greatest jazz players in a studio. I put them at their ease, I let them play. I kept the cameras out of the way, nothing obtrusive. Brilliant. It was so good and so easy and I won an Emmy. Now I produce a crazy situation comedy and make tons of money and I hate it."

Taggart had attended the rehearsal and video-taping of an episode of *One More Time*. It was a day of organized hysteria—he'd found it about as funny as being sober at a drunken party. The best part was the closing theme—a jazz-waltz played by the cast, who were all musicians. "Can't you do something like the show that won the award?" he asked. He threw a peanut twenty feet up to where a gull plucked it out of the air.

"You're talking about going back," Berenson said, the lean face sad and hungry. "Can anybody do that?"

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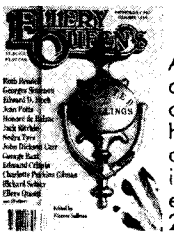

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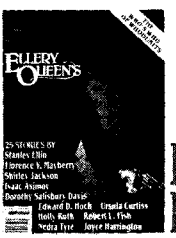

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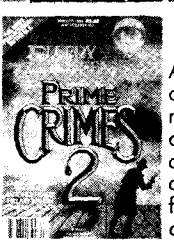

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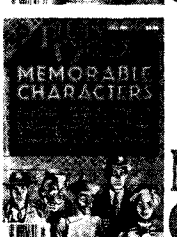

Together for the first time, 22 stories featuring some of the most memorable characters to appear in the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. The who's who of whodunits.

Now, Berenson's wife had abandoned hope of dragging useful information out of Stacey's high-school friend. "How is the book proceeding?" she said as she prepared to leave Taggart alone.

"Baytown will never seem the same," he said, wishing he had never started.

Berenson, when he came downstairs at four in the afternoon, was carrying a packed suitcase. He said he was going to drive up to San Francisco to see a man named Camberwell. Camberwell could provide the necessary whatever to do with an urgent requirement for such and such. He would be back in several days.

"Mysteriouser and mysteriouser," Coral said as Stacey was backing out the Mercedes.

"Looks like it's you and me, kid," Taggart told her. Written out for the day, he was drinking gin.

"I could do worse," she said.

She took Taggart to supper. They drove along Sunset Boulevard all the way into Los Angeles. She parked beside a place called Barney's Beanery because they had pool tables inside and Coral Comax Berenson liked to shoot pool.

The average age of the Beanery clientele appeared to be nineteen. Taggart, in his fifties, felt he was expected to order them to bed. Coral looked contemporary in jeans and trainers and a T-shirt with "The Beggar's Opera" printed on it. She had recently acted in a small production of the classic at a bandbox theater on Melrose. Even with her father's studio connections, Coral could not wangle a decent part in this dog-eat-dog town. Her teenaged daughter Trish was doing better back East. The lucky little ragtag had a part in a pilot. If it succeeded and became a series, her career could be made.

"Five ball in the corner pocket," Coral said. She was movng around the table like her old man in one of those grainy, gutsy thrillers from the Fifties. her cigarette bounced on her lip when she spoke and her body draped itself attractively over the green baize. Taggart was finding California boys an odd lot. They took pretty women for granted. They did not devour femininity with their eyes but treated the opposite sex like buddies. Maybe for them it was too free, too easy. In Taggart's old league, half the game was staring.

Mrs. Berenson was not oblivious. When they sat down to eat after their game, she touched his hand—not in a sisterly way—and said, "Why did you never marry?"

He was as experienced at fielding this question as he had been at

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making the throw to second base. "Baseball career for a start. You know about my brief spell in the Expos system. When my father died, my mother needed me. Along came the good job at CBAY and I found myself locked into Baytown. By the time my mother died, all the good girls were married." The one he thought about most was Tessa Hunter. Pity about Tessa.

"Do you miss baseball?"

"Every day," he admitted. His anger toward his father was deeply repressed. The old man, a railroader nearing his pension, had made himself drunk on the job. Stepping onto a shunting gravel-hopper in the freight yards, he missed his footing and went under the wheels. They were able to prove he was full of alcohol and this cost his widow a lot of compensation money. Her anguish—Gus Taggart had been both husband and best friend for thirty-eight years—went on and did not stop. So Brian had to come home from spring training and see her through it. Six months later, another good catcher had the Expos job while Taggart was doing interviews for Baytown radio, on his way to becoming sports director. "At least I no longer have to worry about broken fingers," he told Coral.

The food came, platters of ribs with home-fries and onions. Coral looked it over and picked up her fork. "Did you ask Stacey about your missing page?"

"I did. When he was getting up this afternoon. He acted as if I was talking a foreign language."

"You think he's okay?"

Brian's response was less than direct. "I told him not to worry. I can find the handwritten material in my notebook and retype it."

Back at the house, before going to bed, Taggart went into his workroom and located the appropriate notebook. As he leafed through the scrawled pages, he saw immediately what had happened. Several pages had been torn out. Without checking the typescript, he was certain the destroyed material corresponded with the missing page 194.

"Coral?" She was in the kitchen.

She came in and he showed her what had happened.

"You think Stacey tore these out?"

"Did you do it? Neither did I. The gardeners?"

"Why would he want to do a thing like that? Was he jealous of your work?"

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"I've had a few stories published in sports magazines. This book is a stab in the dark—it may never get into print."

"But people will see it."

"If it's published, yes. —I remember telling Stacey when I came down here to work I'd be checking it for accuracy with the folks back home." Taggart peered at Coral across the room. "What are you thinking?"

"Maybe that page contained information my husband wants to suppress. You were retyping it from your notebook, so he got rid of that, too."

"What man in his right mind—?"

"You've answered your own question."

While Taggart tried to recall what was on the missing page, Coral went away and came back with two of her Witch's Brews—brandy and Strega over lots of ice. "I've remembered what was happening." He sipped the potent drink. "The characters in my book are based on real people. There's one like Stacey, one like me, one like a girl named Tessa Hunter. Page 194 refers to an event that took place in high school. The three of us drank some beer one night and then we broke into the school and vandalized one of the classrooms. We thought we had a reason, it doesn't matter. The cops showed up. Stacey vanished so fast nobody even knew he was there. Tessa and I were nabbed. We ended up suspended, but Stacey never came forward and we never said he was there."

"That was small of Stacey."

"He was student-council president, football quarterback—he had a reputation to protect."

"Still, he deserted his friends."

In the morning, Taggart was back at work when Coral appeared with the kitchen telephone on its long wire and a book of addresses and phone numbers. "Something clicked in my mind overnight," she said. "Stand by for a bit of detective work." She made spacey music pushing buttons, then spoke cheerfully into the mouthpiece. "Mr. Camberwell, it's Coral Berenson. I'm stuck for the name of the great man who played tenor saxophone in Stacey's Emmy Award show. No, I remember Dexter Gordon. The other one. Stan Getz, thank you, that eases my mind. I'd ask Stacey but he isn't around." She nattered for a couple of minutes more, then said goodbye and rang off. "That was the man," she concluded, "my husband was going to stay with in San Francisco."

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"You've proved he was never going there."

She nodded. "Where, then?"

Taggart gave it more thought than was necessary. His hunch was like an alarm and it continued to go off in his mind, loud and clear. "May I make a telephone call?" he said. "Longer distance than yours?"

"Feel free. If it's what I'm thinking—"

Taggart dialed a number in Baytown. While the circuits were falling into line, he said, "There's something else in my manuscript. The Tessa Hunter character has developed an alcohol problem. The Stacey Berenson character comes back home to try and help her."

"Stacey and this Tessa," Coral said. "Were they close in those days?"

Before Taggart could answer Tessa Hunter was on the line, sounding rough at what would be high noon in Baytown. "Who is it?"

"Tessa, this is Brian Taggart. I'm calling from California."

"Hey, Brian!" Her attempt at sounding surprised did not come off.

"Have you seen Stacey Berenson?"

"Who he?"

"Come on, Tess. I have reason to believe our old accomplice from the great classroom raid of 1952 has resurfaced in your part of the world."

"Is it true you got fired from CBAY, Brian?"

"Leave of absence, dear. I'm writing a book. Berenson is letting me live free at his place near L.A."

"There's a hot-shot kid doing your sports show, lover. You better get back."

Taggart knew he was never going back. She was right, the radio station had eased him out. The book project was a face-saver. Thank goodness the Berensons had agreed to accept him in this prestigious location. Back home he would have been delivering milk, or staggering around the CN freight yards avoiding his father's ghost. "You're sure you haven't seen Stacey?"

"I may be drunk but I'm not blind. I would recognize that famous Number 33 if I saw it on the street."

Taggart felt a couple of loose pieces coming together. They formed something solid he could get hold of. "I have to go," he said. "The meter's running."

"You're the one I'd like to see. It's time you bought me a drink."

"You never know your luck in a small town," he told her.

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Coral was ready as soon as he turned from the telephone. "Something she said made you sit up."

"I felt from the start she was covering up, that she'd run into Stacey. Then she said a funny thing. She referred to his famous Number 33. That's Stacey's old football sweater. He wore it the other night when he and I went for a walk on the beach."

"Wait," Coral said, getting up. "I know where he keeps it."

She left the room and Taggart sat thinking about boredom and stress and man's need to escape and be free. You could have success out the kazoo as the expression went here in California, but after enough years it was just another prison. A beautiful wife, friends galore, the Mercedes—a man might swap the lot for a breath of fresh air. The old hometown could broadcast a hypnotic signal for somebody as bored as Berenson. There was no forgetting the girl who lived there. Taggart's manuscript drew a graphic picture of Tessa Hunter, still magnetically beautiful, but killing herself slowly with booze. A romantic like Stacey Berenson might decide to put on his old uniform from the glamorous gridiron wars and journey back to save her.

"He did it, the sweater's gone," Coral said from the doorway. "He's back there strutting the streets in his famous 33." She came and took the telephone back. "As soon as I can arrange a flight, you and I are going there to find him. I'd like to ask the crazy fool what he thinks he's doing."

Baytown on an October afternoon was so beautiful it made Taggart want to weep with pride. The drive from Mirabel Airport outside Montreal had taken three hours. Coral Berenson was quiet most of the way. Now her head kept turning in the hired car as she said, "God, look at the trees. Cathedrals! The houses, the lawns. What's that burning smell—bonfires?"

"Indian summer, girl. They're working on Heaven to try and get it to be like this."

He drove onto a commercial street and parked outside a hotel called The Coronet. Coral smiled at the striped canopy on iron poles protecting the sidewalk from curb to brass-plated swinging doors. The two rooms Taggart signed for were adjoining. He peered through the doorway as she was hanging up her velvet suit. "Having fun?"

"Brian, I'm loving this. I'm worried about Stacey, but this trip is what I needed."

"I'll tell you something," Taggart said. "It's a relief to be out from

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under that book." He went to a bedside radio and switched it on. "This is CBAY, the voice of Crystal Bay," an announcer said. "Moving right along with the music—" He switched off. "You want to eat," he said, "or would you rather drive up the hill and check in with Tessa Hunter?"

"That name," Coral said, "eliminates my appetite."

They drove up Bridge Hill past a stone church with a terraced lawn. The afternoon was holding its breath, poised on the edge of evening. A woman with a rake was sweeping dried leaves into a mountainous pile. The leaves made a sound like California waves. The character of the streets altered slowly from three-storey frame mansions, dormered and gabled, to low square cottages on postage-stamp lots. Coral couldn't believe the plywood Popeye she saw on a spike in somebody's lawn.

"There she is," Taggart said as he wheeled the car onto a side street. A woman in jeans and windbreaker was staring into a bonfire at the curb. A mass of dark hair streaked with flashes of color was directed over one shoulder. She held a giant glass of beer in both hands against her chest in a pose that looked ceremonial. The fire sent smoke straight up like a pillar. The house behind her was modest, bricks and shingles.

Taggart parked half a block away and he and Carol approached on foot. "Look who's back," he said.

"I knew you'd never stay away." Tessa Hunter's beauty was holding up well against the alcohol, but the bitter amusement in her eyes looked permanent. She said hello to Coral, then complained, "You should have warnd me. I've already got a house-guest."

"We're checked in at The Coronet," Taggart said. He was observing Coral's reaction to mention of a house guest. They both were wondering if it could be Stacey. Had Tessa understood this was Stacey's wife? How many beers was she ahead? If Stacey Berenson *was* here, would the big-time operator let himself be stuck away in this berrybox cottage? It would depend, of course, on how far down his breakdown had carried him. "Can we go inside, Tessa? I think my California friend is feeling the Baytown chill."

The house was surprisingly neat inside. There were a lot of polished surfaces, not many artifacts. The impression came across of possessions sold off. Accepting a beer from a case of twenty-four pints stashed on the kitchen floor, Taggart got right to the point. He explained their concern over Berenson based on his mood and on the fake visit to San Francisco.

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"So old Stace is on a downer," Tessa said with a shrug. "No reason to think he's been here."

"I'm writing a book," Taggart told her. "It's fiction, but based on real people in this town. The incident at the school when he cut and ran—that's in it. Stacey read that part. I think it did something to his mind."

"But not his body." Tessa smiled. "I'd know that body anywhere."

A car approached at excessive speed and braked outside. A door slammed and footsteps approached along the front walk almost at a run. Tessa's face lit up as the front door opened and closed. "I'm here, darling!"

The man who entered the kitchen was handsome after the style of movie stars from the Thirties. He was slim, dark hair greased and parted high, tanned face, thin moustache. He was carrying a pair of ladies' running shoes. "You left these in my car, sweetheart." The accent was French-Canadian.

"This is Marc Beaupré," Tessa said, her feeling for him softening her features. She introduced them as friends of Stacey's from California. Beaupré did not ask who Stacey was. He dropped the shoes on the floor beside Tessa's chair and helped himself to a beer.

"Another hard day selling cars," he said. "Very tough job in this town. Baytown people keep their cars forever."

"Marc is working for Front Street Motors."

He grinned, flooding the room with boyish charm. "Marc should have stayed in Montreal," he said.

"I'd have had to go there and get you."

"Never find me, chérie. The place is full of guys like me."

"Lucky Montreal girls."

The love scene was too corny to be anything but genuine. It went on through the following session of hot dogs grilled on an hibachi, tended by the Montrealer while Tessa organized plates of salad, never failing to keep the glasses topped up with beer. If Stacey Berenson had escaped to Baytown, he had not come to conduct a romantic liaison with Tessa Hunter. And yet—

How was the car market in L.A.? Did they know any dealers? What were property prices like on the Coast? Beaupré was full of questions of this kind. And just below the surface of his youthful charm (a hoax in itself—the man was in his forties) lurked something sinister. He played the carefree bon-vivant but he was always operating.

It was time to go. Leaving the table, Taggart stumbled over Tessa's

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running shoes. He bent over and replaced them At the front door Coral was saying, "Maybe we're wrong about Stacey. I know he's bored with his work these days. Maybe he just took off for Las Vegas."

It was dark outside, and quiet. Heading away from the house, the visitors heard Beaupré's voice behind the closed door. "I hope he has better luck in Vegas," he said, and Tessa hissed at him to be quiet.

An hour later, seated at a table in the back lounge of The Coronet, Taggart and Coral were still struggling with that one. A blind pianist had just followed his seeing-eye dog from the room, having played some outstanding jazz on the baby grand. Now Taggart said, "When I replaced Tessa's running shoes, they were coated with sand."

"What does that mean?" Despite her anxiety over her missing husband, Coral Berenson found she was enjoying this adventure. The small-town streets reminded her of Sherman Oaks where she had grown up.

"Let's take what we've got," Brian said. "Stacey said he was off to San Francisco to see a man. That wasn't true—he probably went somewhere else. I thought maybe he came here because my book got him thinking Baytown. He destroyed an embarrassing page about himself and me and Tessa. On the telephone, Tessa mentioned his Number 33 football sweater, which I know for a fact he's been wearing lately."

"He never put it on for years."

"So we confront Tessa. She stonewalls us. Then in comes this Beaupré character. I know you could only smile at him, he's a sexy devil, but I found him as phony as a Swiss admiral. The guy is a drifter. Why did he leave Montreal? What's he doing in Baytown? And what was that crack about wishing Stacey better luck?"

Coral wasn't smiling now. "Tessa said something about Stacey's body. I didn't like it."

"She said she'd know his body anywhere. Do you want another drink?"

"I'd like to try sleeping."

"Then the sand on the shoes." Taggart waved for their bill. "Coral, I don't want to be alarmist.'

"Go ahead."

"We are not in a part of the world known for its beaches. Unless you go to the Atlantic Ocean—two days' driving—the only sand near

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here is a place over in Prince Edward County called The Sandbanks. It's a fluke of nature, dunes at the edge of the lake. It's not a big area, but it looks like the Sahara."

"What are you saying, Brian?"

"Tessa and Beaupré must have been there. This is October—people don't use the place except in summer. It's remote, you could do things there, I don't know—"

Coral's mind made itself up. "Can we go to the police?"

He walked her out of the hotel and across the market square to the police station, a low brick building facing the hangar-like shape of the Baytown Arena. They were in luck—Chief Greb was on the premises making telephone calls, doing paperwork, supervising a new constable who appeared to be in his teens.

Greb was glad to see Taggart. "Are you saying nice things about me in this book of yours?"

They spent some time detailing their suspicions for the bemused cop. At the end of the story, Greb said, "What do you want me to do?"

"At least talk to them."

"About what? You've given me nothing concrete. Can I go to a respectable citizen like Tessa Hunter and suggest she's murdered Stacey Berenson and buried his body at The Sandbanks? If I'm lucky, she'd laugh."

"What about the man living with her?" Taggart said. "Beaupré. He gives me a funny feeling."

"There I'm with you. Beaupré doesn't belong around here. What's he doing running away from Montreal? What trouble was he in? I spoke to his boss at the showroom and he has the same suspicions. Thing is, Beaupré can sell cars."

In the doorway of the police station, Taggart said, "So what are we supposed to do?"

"Do nothing. Go back to Lotusland and write your book. But first, show this nice lady the local sights."

Taggart took Coral's arm and led her back across the square. He lured her up Front Street with the promise of grilled cheese sandwiches and hot chocolate at the Paragon Cafe. "We're taking part three of Greb's advice," he said.

"What do you mean?" Her arm through his, her cheek occasionally brushing the shoulder of his jacket, Coral was feeling as if she was dating.

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"Tomorrow I show you the local sights. We drive out to The Sandbanks."

They were passing the showroom of Front Street Motors, Marc Beaupré's place of business. A couple of desks with nameplates were positioned close to the plate glass. Taggart paused and stared at the one identified as Beaupré's. He was looking at a baseball balanced on top of a cylindrical wooden cup, like a trophy. The ball was noticeably scuffed, probably where it had been struck a glancing blow by a bat.

"What is it?" Coral asked.

"Nothing," Taggart said. "Hey, wait'll I show you The Sandbanks."

"First I want to see a grilled cheese sandwich."

They drove across the Bay Bridge at ten in the morning, heading south and west. The fields were harvested, the orchards picked clean—the countryside looked pleased with itself and ready for winter after a proud growing season. Coral said, "You're going to think I'm stupid, but I'll say this anyway."

"Say on."

"Are you waiting for me to ask you to come and sleep with me?"

"I suppose I am."

"Would you? If I did?"

"I'm not sure. I'm no good at hypothetical stuff." He drove the car. "I like the way we are right now."

"I do, too." After a silent mile, she concluded, "I suppose I should be feeling embarrassed. But I'm not."

"Feels good to me, too," he said.

This late in the season, the area was deserted, motels closed, private cottages boarded up. A variety store with a couple of gas pumps remained open, its owner alone inside with the door propped wide, shifting stock, painting shelves. Taggart put ten dollars' worth of unleaded into the car and paid for it. Coral bought a chocolate bar and he bought a bag of peanuts.

"Best time of the year," was the merchant's response to Taggart's praise of the day. "World Series weather, I call it. Who do you pick?"

"The Dodgers," Coral said. "I'm from L.A."

"Could have fixed you up with an argument a couple of days ago. Guy drove through here, *he* was from Los Angeles. Said he thought the Blue Jays would win it."

With his heart pounding, Taggart asked, "Was he alone, this man?"

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"I only wish. See that display, the premium glasses? She walked right into it, hell of a mess. I hate to see a woman drunk—middle of the day especially. I know we talk about equality, but don't you agree it looks worse on a woman?"

Back in the car, rolling along shallow ruts toward the sand, Taggart said, "No question, that was Stacey and Tessa."

"They were here a couple of days ago. And she was so definite last night she hadn't seen him."

"She lied."

"Why would she lie—unless something terrible has happened?"

It was like a scene out of *Beau Geste* but with a cool breeze off the lake. Taggart led the trek over steep dunes toward the water's edge. Walking was easier here on a surface packed hard. "It isn't Malibu," he admitted.

Coral looked around at pines on the landward side, then out at a Lake Ontario horizon that could have been the Pacific. They were dead center in a ridge of high pressure. The water lapped in gently. A pair of gulls watched from the bleached boards of a half buried skiff down the beach. This day was in no hurry. "I love it here," she said.

They walked hand in hand, talked about Stacey, managed to find new ways of saying the same things about him. He was surfeited with success, he was bored, he was obsessed with the past—perhaps he was in touch with his own mortality. She said he had not loved her much lately. Yet she did not believe there was another woman. She wasn't jealous of Tessa Hunter.

"We're talking about him as if he's alive," she said.

"No reason to believe otherwise."

"So says your policeman."

On the way back to the car, getting hungry, remembering an attractive roadhouse a few miles down the highway, they passed a rusting oil drum used as an incinerator. Taggart glanced into it, expecting to find it empty.

The red and black and mauve hit him in the gut—the colors of Baytown High School. He got a stick while Coral stood watching, silenced by the rigidity of his movements. He reached in and stirred the remains of the football sweater, shifting ashes, uncovering part of a white numeral three.

"Is it—?"

"Stacey's sweater. What's left of it. They burned it."

She turned to the wind off the lake, closed her jacket, folded her

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arms, stood assessing acres of sand. Her husband's body would be under there someplace. "Do we take this and show it to Greb?" she said after a time.

Taggart hoisted wool remnants out of the drum. "Bear with me," he said. "I want to confront Tessa."

When they showed her the remains of Stacey's sweater, Tessa confessed, but not to murder. She insisted nobody had been killed. "You were right, he came to see me because reading your manuscript reminded him of the old days. He was bothered about running off and leaving us to take the rap."

"Are you telling me my husband flew all this way to apologize?" Coral said. "For an incident back in high school?"

"You don't understand how important it was to him. After it happened, he kept trying to get through to me. I wouldn't discuss it. Brian and I were suspended for the rest of the term while glorious Berenson got away untouched. And that ate him inside. He wanted to go free. But he also wanted me to forgive him. I wouldn't. I left him on the hook." The ruins of the sweater were on the kitchen table. Tessa poured a beer, spilled some, used the famous 33 as a bar rag to swab up the spill. "He's off the hook now."

"What do you mean?"

"I told him forget it. Water under the bridge. We were out there on the dunes where you were today. Life is too short, we agreed. So he took off his Baytown sweater and set fire to it in the trashcan. A symbol of the old school guilt finally turned to ashes."

Taggart waited for the rest of the story. There was no more story. "That's all that happened?"

"He got cold in his shirtsleeves, so we climbed into Beaupré's car and drove home."

"Beaupré's car?"

"Marc says it's mine, he gave it to me. I'm not ready to accept it."

"So where is Stacey Berenson now?"

"Gone home, I presume," she said. "He came down from Montreal on a train. Marc drove him back there to catch his plane."

Changing before dinner in their adjoining rooms at The Coronet, Coral said, "I think she's telling it as it happened, Brian. I'm liking Tessa Hunter more these days. The way she said she wasn't ready to accept a car from Beaupré—"

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"Everything she said could be true, but it doesn't mean Stacey is safe. He wasn't home an hour ago when you telephoned California."

"He could be anywhere. At the studio. Out having fun."

"What did you say in the note you left?"

"That I was taking you to San Diego to visit friends. I could hardly say I was off to Canada to check up on him." She appeared in the connecting doorway looking gorgeous in pale-blue. "I'm convinced Stacey is okay." She looked into Taggart's eyes. "You don't think so."

"There's Beaupré. What if he was jealous of Stacey around Tessa? She says they drove to Montreal, but all we know is Beaupré came back alone. And we can't contact Stacey in L.A."

"You," she scolded, "are becoming morbid. Let's go downstairs and find out if that marvellous pianist is working tonight."

The following day, Coral persuaded Taggart to show her Montreal. They had to go there to catch their return flight. They drove out of Baytown without a further word to anybody—Tessa, Beaupré, Chief Greb. Three hours later, they were in the metropolis.

A midtown hotel would have been beyond Taggart's reach, but Coral insisted she wanted the feel of the city so he agreed to use one of her credit cards. "Now you'll see how frugal I can be," she said as they went to check in. "I refuse to pay for two rooms."

Their suite looked north across the city, with the mountain for a backdrop. Unpacking his suitcase yet again, Taggart was put in mind of his brief career traveling with the baseball team before the old man committed suicide with a train and his mother put out her cry for help. He said: "We're going to have something important to tell Stacey."

Her arms were about his neck. "It won't be very important to him. Nobody knows what my husband wants these days. Except it isn't me." They kissed. "We're doing him a favor."

Taggart knew Montreal well enough to show Coral around. The balmy phenomenon referred to by The Sandbanks merchant as World Series weather continued. They wandered the streets, took cabs, rode the Metro, and explored the arcades under the city center. They did the tourist thing—a calêche ride up the mountain to The Lookout. He took her down to the Old Town for the feel of cobbled streets. They ate soul food at The Black Bottom and went on to Rockhead's Paradise for some scorching jazz. Three days later, on

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the eve of their flight back to California, they tucked themselves up in bed and turned on the television.

"But I like French programs," she complained as he switched channels. She was so happy she could let fly with some uninhibited bitching.

"Hey, the news," she said. "The real world continues."

It was the usual catalogue of horrors. People were sitting in an airplane while suicidal psychopaths decided who they would murder next. A tanker nobody owned was spilling three million gallons of crude on somebody's coastline. Closer to home, in the interests of keeping the neighborhood pure, some citizen had poured kerosene through the letterslot of the family from overseas and pushed a burning rag in after it.

"How much more of this?" Coral moaned.

"Soon we start smiling," Taggart said. "They're coming to the sports."

But there was another item first. Dateline Baytown. The burned-out shell of a late-model automobile had been found on a country road near The Sandbanks. The body in the car was incincerated beyond identification. Police were investigating.

"*Now*," Coral said shakily as Taggart got hold of the telephone and gave instructions to the hotel operator, "maybe that complacent cop will show come interest."

Chief Greb was, indeed, on the case. But it was brand new, the burned-out car found that afternoon. "It could be anybody in that wreck," he said. "But it might be Berenson."

"Might be? How many people missing do you have?"

"Marc Beaupré, for one. He hasn't been to work for two days. And the car that was torched is a Front Street Motors demonstrator."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I have an open mind. Send me Berenson's dental records when you get back to L.A. Put them in one of those air-express packets so I get them the next day."

Coral got out of bed. She began to get dressed. "We have to go out," she said. "We have to find an all-night bar."

"It must have been Beaupré who killed him. He's gone missing now, escaped to God knows where. He was on the run from Montreal, anyway. Tessa was his woman. When Stacey showed up, Beaupré got jealous."

"But why do this horrible thing?"

"I suppose they fought. Maybe Beaupré had a gun. Once he'd

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killed, the fire was used to slow up identification. It gave him a head start."

"He scared me. He looked at my clothes, my accessories, like an appraiser. And then he looked at *me*. My blood ran cold."

Taggart caught sight of her face. "Let's find you that bar," he said.

Driving from Los Angeles airport to Pacific Palisades, Coral seemed distant. Taggart asked her, "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'll organize the dental X-rays if you'll give me the number to call."

"It isn't that. I'm sad about Stacey, don't get me wrong. But he was so miserable for such a long time it's almost a blessing that he's out of it." She was taking the coastal road. There was a spectacular sunburst on the ocean to their left. "No, it must be something else. I feel uneasy."

When they got to the house, Taggart was shifting baggage from the trunk as Coral went ahead with her keys to unlock the front door. He heard a brief silence after she went inside, followed by some loud, crude words. He abandoned the suitcases and went to her at a run. The beautiful living room had been tossed. Furniture lay overturned, books with broken spines covered the floor, even the drapes had been torn half way from the track. "I'm going to be sick," she said. "I can't stay here."

Taggart's first reaction was to check the door. "Was there a break-in? I see no signs of it here."

"Worse. It's him, Beaupré. It must have been After he killed Stacey, he took his identification and keys, he knew where to come—"

"This is solid information for the police. Shall I do it? Do you want to sit in the car?"

"No, I'll stay."

He was about to dial the telephone when he heard her make a throaty sound and he looked up to see Stacey Berenson leaning against the bedroom doorframe. He looked as if he had been through the mill.

"Sorry about the house," he said. "I got back and you weren't here, either of you, and I was drunk and stressed to the max. I saw your note and I rang San Diego. None of your friends had seen you—I felt abandoned—"

"Like when I rang San Francisco."

"Okay, I went home. Home to Baytown. Brian, I'm sorry I damaged

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your manuscript. Listen. I'm crazy, okay? I'd like you to leave out that stuff about me back in school, but I didn't have the guts to come out and ask you. Now I'm asking you."

"What's the big deal? It's part of the story, Stace. Nobody cares but you."

"I started thinking about Tessa. She never forgave me. I wanted to see her. Brian, do you know how bad she's into booze? Your book refers to it but the situation is worse. She's in the bag by noon every day."

Coral sat down amid the wreckage. Five minutes back home and the joyful girl was gone. Taggart saw her again as a middle-aged housewife weighed down with responsibilities and affluence and boredom. "Something you have to do," she told him. "Call that policeman and tell him the body in the car isn't Stacey."

"Body?" Berenson said. "What body?"

Coral explained while Taggart direct-dialed Chief Greb. The policeman was not surprised by the information. "I never thought it was him. Anyway, they completed the examination and it turns out to be a woman. And we're pretty sure who it is. Her neighbors haven't seen Tessa Hunter for a few days."

"You think it's Tessa?"

"Almost certainly. And this Beaupré character who disappeared, we have a line on him now. We think he's European, a Belgian. Real name is Marc Ste. Anne. He's done this a couple of times before. He charms a woman, gets control of her money, then gets rid of her. Sometimes they marry."

"What money did Tessa have?"

"Not much. She wangled a loan of forty thousand on her home. The bank manager remembers Beaupré was with her when she collected the cash."

"Murdering bastard." Taggart remembered how happy Tessa had been in the man's company. "He has a sense of humor."

"How's that?" Greb asked.

"The pseudonym he chose. You say his real name is Ste. Anne: There's a shrine in Quebec called Ste. Anne-de-Beaupré."

Greb knew it. "They do miracles. We could use one to trace this guy now."

Something clicked in Taggart's memory. He recalled standing outside the automobile showroom on Front Street, looking in through the window at Beaupré's desk. "Chief," he said, "your man may have operated in Belgium, but my guess is he's Canadian."

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"Why do you say?"

Taggart described the baseball resting on Beaupré's desk like a trophy and the scar on the cover where it had been struck by a bat. "Dollars to doughnuts he caught that in the grandstand. A foul ball. It must have been one of the great moments of his life—I know baseball fans."

"Thanks a lot. How many million of those do we have?"

"Think about it. This is World Series time. The Toronto Blue Jays are playing the Dodgers. Toronto is a hundred miles from Baytown. It's a hunch, I admit, but I've seen longer shots go in. Beaupré believes he's safe. He's taken himself out to the ballgame."

Greb was thinking out loud. "We have a good recent photograph. They have trained staff at the ballpark. Give them the picture, ask them to watch out for him, he could be a sitting duck for nine innings."

"That's free to you from me, Chief. When I get back home, how about no parking tickets for a while?"

Taggart put down the telephone and went to the kitchen. Coral and Stacey were drinking coffee. She poured him some as he told them about Tessa being the probable victim in the burned-out car and Beaupré being the murderer. When he was all done, he listened to the silence in the room, trying to assess it. "My bag is still in the car," he said. "Why don't we leave it there, I'll pack the rest of my stuff, and you can find me a motel until I book a flight."

"What for?" Coral asked.

"I may as well finish my book at home. You two look as if you could use some time together."

Berenson said, "Coral has told me how she feels. How you both feel. That's cool. I'm not sure what's happening to me from here on, but it isn't with Coral. Okay with you, kid?" he asked her.

"Okay with me," she said. "I only want you to be all right."

Taggart was left with mixed feelings as he saw himself inheriting a share of this lush real estate, having done nothing to earn it. Would he be left forever with a bill for unpaid dues?

"Another thing," Stacey Berenson said cheerfully, "I'd have these locks changed if I were you. I got on well with this Beaupré character when I was up there. He can be a charmer. You're right about the baseball, Brian. He said he loves it and he might get down here someday to see the Dodgers at Chavez Ravine. So what the hell, I was drunk and you know me, Coral. I gave him a key and told him to drop in anytime."

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a *NEW* Em Grady story by

JANE BOSWORTH

"Em Grady," Jane Bosworth wrote in her cover letter with this story, "has been after me to get this story written ever since she first heard that a good friend of mine got bilked out of $9,000 in an oil scam . . . Much of the research used in the story comes from my father-in-law, who spent thirty years of his life working as an oil scout for a major oil company. What information he could not supply was provided by the Taft Oil Museum in Taft, California. I spent half a day climbing all over a portable rig they have set up there."

The result is in our opinion the best and the brightest Em Grady story yet, bless her warm and clever heart . . .

WHIPPIN' WILDCATS

by JANE BOSWORTH

It gets plum lonely settin' on the porch rocking in the night with nothin' to keep you company but the rustlin' a critters in the sagebrush and the howl a distant coyotes. Sets the mind to rummaging through memories that's best left forgotten, an' it makes the heart ache for them what's passed on to a better place. Aging brings on that kind of aloneness 'cause sometimes us oldsters get too tired a chasing the merry-go-round to ever get on.

Reckon it was that aloneness what made my ticker skip a beat when Jake McEwan phoned an' invited himself over. Had to be the aloneness what done it, 'cause Em Grady here ain't dumb enough to get herself snared by the gigolo a the senior citizen's set. No, siree—Jake McEwan may be a heartthrob to many a old minx, but he ain't one to me. Never will be, neither.

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You best keep that in mind, Em Grady, I says to myself, 'cause the gigolo just arrived.

I stood an' watched Jake's car pull into my driveway an' park. And when I seen that tall, lean man emerge from it the breath caught in my throat so's I couldn't even get my howdy out.

Jake sauntered up my steps, wrapped both arms round me, and give me a kiss that set my head to spinning. Then he turned loose a me an' stepped back so's he could see iffen he had any effect or not. "Turn you on, old girl?" he asked.

Danged iffen them words didn't putty my brain an' chase the words from my mouth so's I just stood there blushin' like a schoolgirl. But then Jake started chucklin' an' that got my dander up.

"Think you're purty good, don't ya?"

He stretched a might taller, thumbed his belt loops, an' shed a smug look my way. "I don't just think so, old girl, I know I am."

I wanted to bust that all-knowin' smile right offa his mouth an' pound it clear down to his toenails, but he give me one a them shoulder rubs that seemed to say, "Calm down, Emily, I didn't mean no harm," an' the anger melted right outa me.

That all-knowing smile a his give way to his old salt's grin an' I knowed he was up to somethin' ornery. "Emily, my love, it pleases me to be allowed to spend the night with you again." He laughed, pullin' me close an' huggin' me. "I've missed you. More than you'll ever know. Tell me, did you miss me, too?"

I caught the scents a soap, shampoo, an' aftershave, all minglin' together with just a hint a sweat. Strong masculine scents, comfortin' scents.

"Did you miss me, Emily?" he prodded.

"Reckon I did, Jake," I admitted.

His arms tightened round me and then relaxed. He give me a peck on the cheek an' broke the embrace. "Let's go inside," he said. "I've somethin' important to show you."

I led the way into my rock shop and on back to my livin' quarters, where I settled into my Elmer's easy chair. Jake sat on the sofa across from me. I looked at his weathered face an' marveled at how the years had sculpted his wrinkles to give him a dignified handsomeness all his own.

"It's been almost four months since we last saw each other," he said.

"Three months, fifteen days, to be exact." The words just escaped

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'fore I could get my mouth shut. Way to go, Em, I says to myself. That's like exposing cards in a poker game.

A smile wriggled loose at the corners a Jake's mouth, but he didn't up the ante any. A gentleness settled in his eyes an' somethin' comfortable passed from him to me. Then I seen seriousness drift onto his face an' I knowed he was here for somethin' more than visitin'.

"Ella Mae Fitzhugh's in trouble," he said, an' dug some papers outa his coat. "I figured you'd like to know about it."

"What kinda trouble?"

He leaned forward an' handed the papers to me. "These will explain it," he said.

I read the title a one a them papers an' I suspicioned just what kinda trouble Ella Mae was in. *Transglobal Resources, Inc. Lease Purchase Agreement*, it read. By the time I finished readin', I realized that she was in a heap a trouble. She'd invested $75,000 in a share of a oil lease out near Weaver, Arizona.

"Weaver! Weaver! Why there's nothin' out there but ruins, rattlesnakes, an' a old graveyard!"

I reckoned her Homer musta been doing flip-flops in that grave a his right 'bout now 'cause the money she'd invested had come from the insurance policy he'd left her.

"Used to be," I said to Jake, "that us decent folks could tar an' feather crooks that sold worthless paper to widows like Ella Mae."

"Used-to-be's aren't going to help your friend." Jake's voice was gentle. "And neither will anger, old girl."

The sense a them words lowered my blood-pressure some an' set my mind to ponderin' ways a gettin' Ella's money back.

"Maybe Sheriff Bill could help," I said.

"Emily, I know how these outfits work," Jake said. "At the first sign of trouble, the company will fold up and disappear."

I set the papers down an' looked at him. "What can you tell me 'bout this here Transglobal Resources?"

"The parent headquarters for the company is in Laguna Hills, California, but it's got temporary offices in Wickenburg," he said. "The owner, J. Norton Mailer, is working out of those offices. Ella Mae gave me his phone number. —Emily, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinkin' that the first thing we got to find out is iffen there really is a well at Weaver. Iffen it ain't there, Sheriff Bill will arrest Mailer before he can run away. At first light tomorrow, you an' me is goin' for a spin in the desert . . ."

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I'd a bet my last dollar there was no drillin' rig at Weaver—an' iffen I'd a made that bet, I'd a lost. It was there, all right. Settin' smack dab in the middle of a third of a acre a graded land just south a the old graveyard was one a them portable drillin' rigs mounted on the bed of a huge semi. Whoever had done the gradin' had been careful not to bother the old rockhouse ruins just west a the mud pits or the stream that trickled out natural spring near the house.

I expected Jake to say somethin' 'bout the rig, but he didn't. He just sat there starin' at it.

"Emily, do you know anything about drilling?" he asked.

"Reckon I picked up some when my Elmer wildcatted the McKitrick fields in 'thirty-six. Why?"

"Because, my dear Emily, I know absolutely nothing about drilling for oil."

I parked Old Lizzy beside a pair a battered jeeps in front a the rig an' Jake an' me got out. I could hear the steady hummin' a the mud pumps an' I seen the mud line jumpin' as it pumped mud into the hole they was drilling, but the kelly wasn't turnin' an that seemed a might peculiar. It meant that the bit wasn't turnin' against the bottom a that hole.

"Why would anyone pump mud down through a bit that wasn't turnin'?" I asked myself.

"Mud?" Jake caught the word.

"Mud's a mixture a chemicals that gets pumped into the hole through the drillin' pipe an' out the drillin' bit," I said. "It brings rock an' debris outa the hole and keeps the bit from gettin' stuck. But that bit ain't turning 'cause the kelly up there ain't rotatin' that pipe one inch."

"Emily," he said, "that makes no sense at all."

"It would iffen they weren't drillin' at night, an' it looks like that's what they're doing, 'cause there ain't a soul in sight up there on that rig. You go on up there an' see iffen you can find anyone. I'm goin' over to the mud pits an' have me a look at the tailin's to see what's been comin' outa that hole they're supposed to be drillin'."

Jake went on up the stairs onto the substructure a the rig whilst I moseyed off to the left where the mud pits was.

I reckoned pits had been modernized some since Elmer's day 'cause they weren't just holes dug in the sand. They were two huge steel containers set on top a the sand. Mud is pumped outa one side a the pits an' down the drillin' pipe, where it collects debris. It flows up outa the hole an' over the shaker tables, where debris is screened

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out an' dumped onto the ground whilst the mud goes down into the pit to be used again. I had me a look at that debris.

They was mighty peculiar tailin's—bone-dry an' layered in the order they'd been drilled outa the earth. Sand on the bottom, shale in the middle, an' quartz, epidote, an' actinolite on top. They'd drilled *from soft to hard rock.*

I had me a look at the mud in them pits an' seen that it still had the pinkish tinge a baroid, just like it wasn't gettin' dirtied by whatever the bit was cuttin' into. I was standin' there ponderin' on clean mud an' hard rock when a gruff voice yanked me upright an' spun me around. I come nose to nose with a bearded prospector who looked for all the world like Ian McFarland. I ain't seen Ian in thirty years.

"Ian McFarland?" I asked.

The look on his face told me he was diggin' through his memory for my name an' couldn't find it. "It's me, you old hound," I said. "Em Grady."

He stood there looking 'bout as foolish as a greenhorn that'd just laid claim to a stake chock full a nothing but fool's gold. He didn't have a word to lay on me.

"Last time I heard from you," I said, "you was workin' a claim in Alaska. What are you doin' back here?"

"Government bought me out," he said, "'cause my claim's on the east corner of a new national park. I packed up my nuggets, took out ten sacks a quartz-laden ore to remind me a my luck up there, an' came back here to search for another vein. I was prospectin' out here when I met up with this Mailer fellow. He offered me fifty dollars a day plus a trailer to live in if I'd keep the rockhounds off his lease. I didn't have anythin' better to do so I took his offer. You rockhoundin' out here, Em?"

"Nope, Ella Mae Fitzhugh's got a interest in this here lease," I said, "an' I come out here to see iffen there really was a well at Weaver."

The mentionin' a Ella Mae set the spark of affection to smoldering in them grey eyes a Ian's. Everybody in Jerome knowed they was high-school sweethearts. Then outa the blue, she up an' married Homer. Ian left town the day a the weddin'.

"How come Homer's not checkin' it out?" he asked.

"Homer died last year," I said. "It's his insurance money that's invested out here. Iffen it gets lost, Ella May's got nothin' left to live on."

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Ian scratched that thought into his beard whilst he stood there rummagin' through my words, filin' away Homer's death an' Ella Mae's vulnerability.

"Mailer don't seem like the kinda man that'd steal from widows," he said.

I ignored his words. "How come there ain't no crew out here?"

"Crew's here, Em," he said. "They been here since five this mornin'. That's when they start drillin' for the day."

I looked up an' seen that somebody had started the kelly to turning, but I didn't see a soul on the rig. "I don't see nobody on that rig," I said.

"They're probably eatin' pie and drinkin' coffee in the doghouse, Em. Leastways that's what they do most of the day. That rig just don't need a crew to do much more than check the pumps once in a while."

I knowed that drillin' had modernized a lot since my Elmer first wildcatted, but nothin' could convince me that one a them rigs could up an' do the drillin' all by itself whilst the crew sat chewin' fat inside a steel outbuilding used to shelter 'em.

"Mind iffen I have me a look at some a the gauges on the rig?" I asked.

"Course not, Em. I'll even take you up there."

Ian an' me walked over to the rig an' climbed the stairs to the substructure. We popped our heads into the doghouse, where we found Jake jawin' with three bearded longhairs that looked for all the world like pirates. One of 'em even wore a rhinestone plug in his left nostril. Jake looked mighty outa place in their company. "Emily," he said. "I hope you haven't been looking for me."

"Reckon I was lookin' for you," I said. "Iffen you're through gabbin', I got to get home before noon."

Jake said his goodbyes, an' stepped outside. I introduced him to Ian McFarland, then we found the gauges I wanted to see. They read bought as I expected they would, with the needle of the Martin-Decker Drill weight gauge a little to the right a zero an' the needle of the rotary torque gauge settin' smack dab on zero.

"Well, what do you think?" Ian asked.

"I'm thinkin' that we got to find us some way a whippin' these no good wildcatters out here," I said. "There's no pressure on the rotary torque gauge an' the Martin-Decker gauge shows only enough pressure to account for the mud being pumped in an' outa the hole. All they're doing out here is fannin' the bit above the hardrock they hit

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a while back. Oil pools on top of hardrock, not underneath it. I figure they'll keep fannin' that bit long enough to bilk Joe Public for all they can get, then they'll light on outa here."

Ian McFarland looked like you coulda blowed him over just by breathin' hard. Then I seen the cheeks above his beard redden with anger. "Mailer's bringin' the payroll out tomorrow," he said. "Maybe we oughta just steal it, along with that brand-new jeep he drives."

"Ain't enough money in that payroll to account for what Ella Mae invested," I said. "Besides, all that'd do is land us in the poky an' that ain't gonna do nobody no good."

"Maybe I oughta put a slug in Mailer's fat gut."

"Ian McFarland, you got to quit thinkin' physical an' start thinkin' smart. Greed is what runs Transglobal Resources an' we got to think a some way to use that greed."

Then it hit me that everythin' about Weaver, from its founding to its death, had to do with that peculiar kinda greed that drives men to spend a lifetime searching for that pot a gold at the end a the rainbow. "You ever do any serious prospectin' in Weaver?" I asked Ian.

"'Course I did," he said. "Most everybody that knowed the history a Weaver went lookin' for the vein a gold that fed her placer claims."

"You got any a that Alaska quartz you mentioned out here?" I asked.

"Sacks a it. Why?"

"'Cause I got me a idea 'bout whippin' wildcats," I said.

I told Ian an' Jake my idea an' each a them added a touch or two of his own. We come up with a plan that was based on good old-fashioned tried-an'-proven greed. Jake an' me was to work outa my place. Ian had to wait for them wildcatters to go home for the night 'fore he could bait the trap to catch Mailer in.

Jake an' me got to my place in the early afternoon. Whilst he went inside to call the number Ella Mae give him, I went out back an' dug up my Elmer's money jar. They was two pouches a gold dust, a pouch a nuggets, three one-carat diamonds, and fifty thousand in cash in that jar. I took out the money an' pouches a gold, then I reburied the jar. On the way back to the house, I stopped at the old tack shed to pick up Elmer's prospectin' gear. I put the gold an' the gear inside a Lizzy an' went inside to check on how Jake was doin'.

He was jawin' on the phone when I come into the living room. "That's right, Mr. Mailer," he was sayin'. "I did say she keeps a

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money jar buried in her back yard. Of course, I know how dangerous that is. Banks! Pshaw, why, Emily hasn't trusted banks since she lost nine-tenths of her money in the Great Depression. This will have to be a cash deal, Mr. Mailer. —How much cash?" He looked at the wad of money in my hand. "I'd guess about fifty thousand dollars," he said.

Silence.

Jake cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "I think he fell over in his chair. I heard a thump and—

"Yes, Mr. Mailer," he said. "We are free today. One hour sounds find. Coming from Wickenburg, you take Highway 89 to Congress. Go about a mile, and you'll come to a rock shop on the left. That's my sister's place. We'll see you soon."

He hung up and grinned at me. "Our wildcat is on his way to the whipping post," he said.

J. Norton Mailer arrived sooner than expected, apologized for being early, an' then walked right in an' settled into my Elmer's favorite chair just like he belonged there. He wiped the sweat from his fat brow and shed a benevolent smile into the room. Settin' there like that, grinnin' like a saint, Mr. J. Norton Mailer looked more like a fat preacher than a crook. He had a soft, plump body an' eyes that drilled into your very soul. It was his eyes that bothered me most. They were icy blue eyes that appraised your every weakness.

He asked us all about how we heard 'bout his company, 'an then he got to the business a selling up a line a goods 'bout his philanthropic interests in my money.

"You see, Mrs. Grady, I have a soft spot in my heart for widows." He slapped at the flab on his chest to punctuate his words. "After I was orphaned at the tender age of three, my Grandmother Mailer, God bless her sweet soul, took me in and raised me. And she did it on a Social Security pension!

"Why, I can remember times when she went without food—without food, mind you—so she could save enough to buy shoes for me to wear to school. It was hunger that sent Grandma to an' early grave. Black ugly hunger."

He punctuated them last three words with a fist in the air. Then the fist fell into his lap, his fat face transformed from anger into sadness. "You look like dear—old—grandma." His voice broke with emotion.

He took out a handkerchief an' mopped his eyes. Then he tooted

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his nose and studied the effect he'd had on us. His eyes bulged from under his lids an' flicked from Jake to me an' back again.

"I've spent a lifetime repaying grandma." His voice took on a revivalist's lilt. "A lifetime, I tell you. Dedicating my very soul to searching out and helping deserving widows. God gave me—me! J. Norton Mailer!—the mission to seek out and help deserving widows. Now I've found another one for my parish!"

He looked ceilingward to see iffen anyone up there had heard. Then he nodded to himself an' shed a lovin' look on me.

"Amen," I said.

"I can tell by just lookin' at you, Mrs. Grady, that you are a deserving woman. So how much money can I triple for you?"

I dug my wad outa my pocket an' handed it over.

"Fifty thousand dollars," I said.

He cupped that money in both hands an' stared at it like it was some kinda holy relic.

"You can count it iffen you've a mind to," I said.

He stuffed the money into his pocket an' dug out a set a papers identical to the ones Ella Mae had signed. He handed them over to me along with a pen. The amount was filled in an' the papers signed in silence. Then he give me my copy an' pocketed his. He hauled himself to his feet an' started for the door. Jake an' me moseyed along after him as far as the porch, where we stopped an' watched him squeeze his mass in behind the wheel a his car an' drive off.

"Once he's got your money, he don't mince with any more words," I said to Jake.

"J. Norton Mailer only *thinks* he's seen the last of you, Emily Grady," he said. "By this time tomorrow afternoon, he'll be wishing he wasn't such a charitable man."

Three hours before sunrise the next morning, I loaded Jake an' me into Lizzy an' drove out to the rig in Weaver where Ian was waiting. I parked near the foot a the substructure an' Jake an' me got out. Ian greeted us.

"I shut off them mud pumps soon as the crew left yesterday," he said, "an' did what needed to be done. If we're lucky, the crew will get so interested in what we're doin' they'll forget to turn 'em on when they come in."

"Reckon we'll just have to make sure they forget," I said.

Jake an' Ian carried my prospectin' gear an' pouches a dust an' nuggets over to the stream just west a the tailin's from the mud pits.

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I scooped up a pan full a tailin's, sprinkled 'bout a fourth a the dust an' seven nice nuggets into it. Then I handed the rest a the gold over to Ian an' Jake, who worked it into the tailin's. By the time them wildcatters come in, all three a us had the beginnin's of a nice stash a gold in our pans. Sure enough them wildcatters got so interested in our pannin' they plumb forgot 'bout the pumps.

"Who'd a ever thought?" the biggest one scratched his head.

"Thought, hell," the one with the rhinestone in his nostril said. "I want to get me some a that before Mailer shows up with the payroll."

"But what are we gonna use for pans?" the third one asked.

"Pie tins," I said. "I think I seen a few pie tins in that doghouse a yours."

All three a them run up to the doghouse an' come back with a tin. Pie tins ain't the best pans in the world, but they was so much gold in them trailin's it weren't long till each a them had a little show in the bottom a his pan. They got so interested in pannin' that they didn't even notice when Mailer drove in an' parked.

I watched him get outa his jeep an' waddle over to us.

"What the hell are you people doing?" he bellowed.

"Numbin' the arthritis outa our hands," I said.

I was gettin' more than show now, 'cause the nuggets was coming into view. I stopped my swirlin' long enough for Mailer to get a good look at that yeller. Mailer leaned over so's that his hot breath warmed my neck. "What's that?" His fat finger pointed to the nuggets.

"Gold," I said.

"We struck it rich, boss!" Rhinestone Nostril shouted. "We hit us a vein down there!"

Next thing I knowed, Mailer was runnin' his fingers through the show in my pan. I had a nugget in there the size of a marble.

I finished my pannin', tweezered the flakes into my glass vial, an' put the nuggets into my pouch. Then I got up, walked over to them tailin's, scooped up another pan, an' come back to the stream. I knelt down an' started pannin' again. Mailer never said nothin' but I could feel his eyes borin' into my back. Didn't take me long before another nugget started shinin' through the rock. It was 'bout the size a the fingernail on my little finger. I was gettin' plenty a show a flakes, too.

I finished my pan, stood, an' offered it to Mailer. He poked at the gold. Then his eyes met mine.

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"Looks like you drilled right into the vein that fed the placer claims a Rich Hill, Mr. Mailer," I said. "An' from the looks a what's coming outa them tailin's, I'd say I got me seventy-five percent of a fortune. At least, that's what my contract offers. Seventy-five percent a all mineral rights."

Mailer's eyes shifted from me to Jake to Ian McFarland. It didn't take him long to put two and two together an' come up with a snake. "You're all in this together," he said.

"Reckon you could say that," I said. "Ian McFarland there use to prospect this here desert with my late husband."

Iffen looks coulda killed, Ian McFarland woulda been struck dead by Mailer. Then somethin' else settled onto Mailer's fat face, somethin' I couldn't quite put a finger on.

"Maybe," he said, "the gold's only in those tailings. Maybe, you salted the tailings."

"Iffen you believe that," I said, "then start drillin' in that there well an' see what comes outa her."

Mailer accepted my challenge an' ordered his crew to start drillin'. Didn't take long before the mud started bringin' up quartz-laden ore. Mailer waddled over to the tailin's an' rummaged through them like a hungry pig. When he found a nugget, he liked to went crazy.

"Ain't no purtier sight in the world than that," I said.

Them words had a peculiar affect on Mailer. Iffen I didn't know better, I say they up an' slapped him a good one 'cause he just stared at me like he was in shock. Then them pig's eyes a his narrowed on me an' he licked his lips.

"I'll write you a check right now for seventy-five thousand dollars for your share," he said.

I looked to Ian for help.

"Developing a mine can take years, Em," he said. "An' none a us is gettin' any younger."

"I ain't plannin' on dyin' just yet," I told him.

"Emily," Jake took over, "twenty-five thousand dollars is not a bad return on your investment."

I rubbed the numbers into my chin. Then I looked from Ian to Jake to Mailer.

"I don't deal with no bank checks," I said. "It's strictly cash with me."

Mailer looked like them words had hit him in the middle of his fat gut.

"I don't keep that much cash lying around," he said. "I'll have to

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telex my headquarters in California for the money. And I'll have to go to Phoenix in order to find a bank with that much cash in it. It will take all day."

"You make that a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars," I said, "an' I won't call my friend who works for the *Sedona Sentinel Newspaper* to tell him 'bout my good fortune."

Mailer looked downright confused.

"I reckon you could buy back all them contracts you sold on this here lease at cost iffen this was kept under the hat, so to speak," I added.

Understandin' passed from him to me an' back again. He knew I had a hold a him where it hurts an' he also knowed they was no way a gettin' free without a lot a pain. He agreed to my terms.

J. Norton Mailer was as good as his word. Right 'bout three in the afternoon, he showed up at my place with a briefcase full a money. I handed him my contract and Ella Mae's contract. Surprise settled on his face.

"I ain't a greedy woman," I said. "The extra hundred thousand is for Ella Mae Fitzhugh. I figured that was fair."

"More than fair." Mailer was thrilled. "More than fair."

He left with a empty briefcase an' two canceled contracts.

That night Ian, Jake, Ella Mae, an' me celebrated with a champagne dinner at the El Bayou in Sedona. Ella Mae couldn't believe her good fortune.

"But how do you know there *really* isn't gold there?" she asked. "After all, you did say that nuggets and quartz-laden ore started coming out of the well just after they started drilling again. Didn't you?"

"Ella Mae," Ian said, "last night when I shut off the mud pumps to the well, I put ten full sacks a quartz-laden ore an' one pouch a nuggets down that hole. It all sank to the bottom. When Mailer ordered the drillin' to start again, the mud brought it up."

"But where did all that gold come from?" she persisted.

"From my claim in Alaska," he said. "I brought it with me for luck when I came home."

"And now it's gone," she said, "All because of me. Ian, how will I ever repay you?"

Ian reached over an' give her hand a lovin' pat. I seen the spark a affection begin to sputter in them eyes a Ian's an' I seen the look in her eyes fan it to life. Then I looked across the table at Jake an'

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seen somethin' more than warmth in them blue eyes a his. He raised his glass for a toast an' we all followed suit.

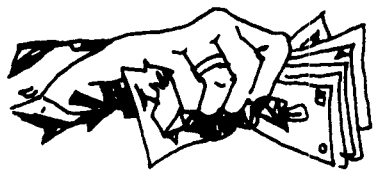
"Here's to good friends," he said an' looked at me. "Because good friends, like good wine, keep getting better with age."

The glasses clinked.

The wine was drunk.

The meal was eaten.

I went home with Jake McEwan.



DETECTIVERSE

CONTRADICTION IN TERMS

by JOHN ABBOTT

I know fictional crime uses slang all the time
But I think it is asking a lot
To suspend disbelief when the bogus jewel thief
Tells his friend, "Buddy, this ice is hot."

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This dark first professionally published fiction is from J. Ebert, who told us this about herself: "I'm forty-eight and married to a successful graphics designer. We have two dogs, two cats, and twenty-seven finches, but no children. I've lived in small towns and big cities all over the country from Alaska to New York City and have been an employee, an employer, and unemployed before I found my niche: retired in Oregon with a word processor."

Welcome to EQMM, J. Ebert. Continue to use your new-found time and word processor this well . . .

SLEEPING IS DANGEROUS

by J. EBERT

Matt will kill me. I know it. I've known since the baby died.

I don't want to sleep when Matt's home. This morning when he got up and found me in the kitchen nodding over a cup of cold coffee, he wanted to know why I'm up so much at night. I told him I can't sleep much at all any more. He carried on about how tired I look and how I need to get some rest—as if he cared. While his bacon sizzled, he sharpened one of my kitchen knives. "You keep these knives too dull," he said. "A sharp knife works with you, not against you. —Now that's sharp." He tossed me a paper towel he'd shredded. Matt knows I'm afraid of sharp knives.

After he left for work, I locked the doors and fell asleep on the couch.

Tonight on his way to bed he hugged me and asked, "Why don't you take a hot bath, sweetheart? I'll bring you a glass of warm milk. It will put you right to sleep." I don't want to go to sleep.

At Susan's today, I said, "Matthew will kill me." She almost

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choked laughing—said it was the best joke she'd heard all week, maybe all year. "Matthew kill you? Never. He'd be lost without you."

She can think what she likes, but I know Matt will kill me. He hasn't been the same since the baby died. The way he mopes around the nursery fondling her toys and rocking her crib gives me the shivers. I want to give her things away and clean up that room but he won't let me. He won't make love to me any more, either—because of the scar across my belly.

My headaches are worse. Sometimes the pain keeps me awake all day. I'm so tired I feel myself unraveling. Memory is funny. I can't remember this morning but I clearly remember two months ago.

Matt had flowers sent around today. The delivery person woke me up. The note read, "I hope you're feeling better." He had pizza delivered for dinner last night, and today flowers.

I spent today on my knees—throwing up and remembering two months ago. Matthew said he rushed upstairs to see her as soon as he got home that day and when she didn't move he called Dr. Corson. Matt said she was cold. And stiff. And blue.

Before Dr. Corson arrived, Matt found me in the bathroom, curled up on the tile floor, passed out in my own vomit. Dr. Corson said I must have fainted from the shock and hit my head on the tub. He told us that people, especially infants, often die in their sleep. Will I?

Yesterday Matthew tricked me. He said he was going to be working late but he came home an hour earlier. He said the client had changed the meeting. He suggested we walk along the lake shore to cool off. He knows I'm afraid to get close to water.

I'm so tired I dream and cry out while my eyes are open. I can't sleep during the day any more. I worry about Matt coming home and finding me asleep—like he could have today.

I wonder, what does it feel like to be suffocated in your sleep? You probably never know what happened.

I'm too tired and weak to do anything, so Matthew fends for himself. Some days he brings food home but I don't eat any of it—I have Susan bring me something when I'm hungry. I don't think Matt would risk putting something in the food, though—it would be too easy to trace afterward. It doesn't matter much. I throw everything up, anyway.

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Dreams torment me. If I drift even for a few minutes, I wake up choking on my own tears.

Matthew is demanding that I see Dr. Corson. I won't go. Dr. Corson will give Matt something to make me sleep—for my own good, like he made that ugly scar cutting the baby out of me for my own good. I won't go.

Matt brought Dr. Corson here to the house. He knew I never wanted to see Dr. Corson again! The doctor said if I didn't get some rest soon I'd end up in the hospital.

I'd be safe from Matt in a hospital. Maybe I could get some sleep there. And they'd have something to ease my headaches.

I collapsed in Susan's kitchen. When she threatened to call Matt, I got hysterical and made her take me straight to the hospital. They took all kinds of tests. I've lost thirty-five pounds and my hip bones stick out. My breasts are flat and flabby. Matthew loved my breasts—he said they were complete perfection. And that ugly scar will never go away. I can't stand to look at myself in the mirror.

I stayed an extra day at the hospital. I felt safe there, yet the nurses said I screamed several times during the night. Dr. Corson gave me some pills for my nerves. I won't take them. They might make me sleep. Sleeping is dangerous.

Last night Matthew locked himself in his study and oiled his pistol—I know that smell. I found the oily rag in the garbage this morning, under the eggshells and coffee grounds. Then I found the gun in the garage, under some old newspapers. The cartridges were on the bottom shelf of Matt's tool cabinet. I put the gun in the night stand next to the bed. I need to protect myself. Matt's going away soon, on a business trip. He's arranged for a nurse to stay with me "just in case." Just in case of what?

He hinted at wanting to have another baby, said it might be good for me!

Before Matt left for the airport, he held me in his arms. When I said, "You're going to kill me, aren't you?" he hugged me close to his chest and kissed my hair. "Oh, my darling, why would I kill you?" he said. "You're my angel." His hand, icy cold and damp, stroked my face. "But I'm so worried about you."

My head hurt so much, the screaming inside it was so loud, I

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hardly heard Matt leave. He's gone now, but he'll be back later tonight when it's dark to kill me. I'll be ready. I sent the nurse home. I want to be alone when he returns.

That's him pulling up in the driveway, into the garage. The door to the house is locked. Now he's at the side door, forcing it like a burglar. When I'm alone I always put the night chains across all the doors.

He ran up the stairs calling, "Sweetie, I'm home! The plane couldn't leave in this weather!" I shot him through the heart.

I told the police I thought he was a burglar. I can't bear to tell them that after I shot him the airport phoned to reschedule his flight. Poor Matt. But he *was* going to kill me, I know he was.

I wonder what it's like to be shot through the heart. You probably never know what happened.

I wish I could sleep.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Sarah Bell was well educated, rare in the lower levels of the company, with a good mind which she tended to speak. Her good mind might be admirable, Peter thought, but he was more impressed by her rakish legs and disturbingly sulky lower lip . . .

THE SECRETLY CRAZY GIRL

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Days after Rabid's death his minions were still talking about it. Or rather Miss Manifex talked while her colleagues had begun hearing only every other word or less.

Miss Manifex said: "I think we'd better avoid referring to it, you know. For poor Sarah's sake." This was fairly rich even for Miss Manifex, she being prime offender. Sarah Bell was out of the office for a minute but Miss Manifex mouthed her name as if the girl could hear through walls. A thoroughly tiresome old biddy, La Manifex.

Peter Genge snorted. "Poor Sarah can look after herself, thanks." He was a very young twenty-five and going through a cynical period. Though unaware of it, he sounded less abrasive than wistfully admiring.

Miss Manifex smiled painedly. "You're quite wrong, Peter. Sarah has this veneer of cheap sophistication, but nobody could be as callous and shallow as she makes out." Peter winced at the honeyed vitriol. Because Miss Manifex was a much mocked and disliked target for younger members of the staff, it hadn't occurred to him that the antipathy was mutual. "No," she went on, "Sarah *said* it, and look what happened. It must be eating away at her conscience." Her lips were too thin and arid for smacking, but there was no doubt she savored the idea.

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"Come off it," said Peter. "People are always wishing people dead—there's bound to be the occasional coincidence. The wonder isn't that it happened, but that it doesn't happen all the time. Especially when everyone knows it wasn't meant." He paused, adding lamely, "If you get my drift."

"Quite right," Bernard Merchant agreed austerely yet vaguely. "Let's get on with our work, you people." He went sleepwalking past the people, both of them, to his plate-glass lair in the corner. Rather less than a week before it had been Rupert Rabin's lair. Mr. Merchant was still dazed by the twin miracles of promotion within five years of retirement, and deliverance from a monster. Not that he admitted these days that Rabin had been that. Only minutes ago, when Peter Genge let slip the Rabid nickname, Merchant had positively glared at him and snapped, "A bit of respect, please. Don't they teach it at school any more, speaking no ill of the dead?"

Sarah Bell's mouth had opened, but then she'd changed her mind. Peter could guess her silent response: that Rabid had been a minor failure as a human being, and the fact that he'd become the late Rabid was irrelevant. Something stinging and deliberaely outrageous along those lines, anyway. Sarah was well educated, rare in the lower levels of this company, with a good mind which she tended to speak.

Reflection in his VDU screen showed Peter Genge a ninny with an infatuated and lecherous grin. It made him aware of being a humbug. Sarah Bell's good mind might be admirable but he was more impressed by her rakish legs and disturbingly sulky lower lip.

Frowning, he mused that Sarah was all sorts of things, but not a witch. All the same, it *was* weird. She had appealed to wise and omniscient Providence to strike Rabid down, and within the hour he'd promptly and obligingly expired. At least, that was one way of looking at events.

Rabid had been struck very late on a Friday afternoon. Nobody knew the exact time but it must have been late because Miss Manifex had just slipped away to the washroom, whence she would fail to return, leaving by a side door ten minutes before official quitting time.

Rabid had earlier dropped the fat file of quarterly returns on Bernard Merchant's desk. It made a noise like a firecracker. Perhaps he practiced at home with telephone books. "Bernie, you've made a real dog's breakfast of this," he'd said.

The extreme tip of Bernard Merchant's nose went white, the dis-

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placed color flying to his hollow cheeks, where it showed like badly applied rouge. He detested being addressed as Bernie and wasn't terribly keen on jumping out of his skin. Patently pleased and rewarded, Rabid chortled, "For your sake, I can't submit this garbage. I've flagged the minor errors with yellow marker and the real blunders in red, just to get you started. I can't stay gassing with you—a willing woman, a wine bar, and bed await. Have a good weekend."

This was a cruel jest because he had left Merchant looking at a solid morning or afternoon's drudgery. At 9 A.M. sharp on Monday, the head-office courier would clump in to collect the documentation.

Peter Genge had looked away from Merchant out of compassion and caught Sarah Bell staring after Rabid, eyes narrowed, nostrils flared—her enigmatic, fascinated expression reminding him of a cat poised to leap. "What's the matter?" he had blurted as the door slammed behind Rupert Rabin.

Sarah had blinked. "Oh, that bloody man! I wish he'd break his neck!" Her vehemence had startled young Genge almost as much as the bombshell file had disturbed Bernard Merchant.

Who was riffling through the quarterly returns, his face lengthening. Peter said, "Not to worry, Mr. Merchant. If the three of us split it—"

Merchant wasn't listening. "There aren't any errors. The spacing between the columns is tighter in places, that's all. To save stationery, avoid using extra sheets. That—*vandal* has scrawled over every page!" He was close to tears of frustration.

Coughing uneasily, Peter repeated, "We can get it done in an hour or so."

Sarah had said sweetly, "Yes we can, can't you? TGIF, Peter. See you on Monday."

In the event, it had taken the two men until past eight o'clock to compile a fair copy of the returns and make a dozen photocopies. Then Merchant had insisted, since they lived only streets apart, on Peter coming home with him for "A bite to eat and a drop of something."

On their arrival, Mrs. Merchant, glaring impartially, had demanded, "What sort of time is this?" and feasted them on sad cheese sandwiches. The chops, she pointed out, had long since incinerated, and in any case there had been only a pair of them. The drop of something turned out to be spectacularly nasty sherry.

"We're not what you'd call *drinkers*," Merchant had explained

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apologetically. "That bottle's been on the sideboard since the Christmas before last."

Mrs. Merchant, voice ringing with resentment, told Peter: "Mother swears by it." He nearly replied that he wasn't surprised—it made him want to swear, too. But it had been such a foul Friday night, TGIF be damned, that he merely smiled wanly and got the hell out of there.

As Sarah Bell had predicted, they saw each other again on Monday—with one notable exception. Rabid wasn't there. A mixed blessing, Peter Genge had considered. The usual reason for Rabid's lateness was that his flashy American car had broken down, meaning that the respite would be followed by storms of bad temper.

He discovered he was wrong when Hugh Cornish, the managing director, walked in. Cornish looked pale, but that was nothing new: his secret nickname around the building was The Undead. He announced, "Something rather dreadful has happened—an accident to Rupert Rabin. Actually, um, he's passed away."

Nobody said anything that Peter could remember. Then Hugh Cornish didn't draw himself up and declaim, "The king is dead, long live the king." What he said was, "Mr. Merchant, um, *Bernard*, you'll have to take over. Those infernal quarterly returns—"

"Went off an hour ago, sir," Merchant assured him mechanically.

"Good show. Splendid." Cornish, hearing himself, looked stricken. "Um, this isn't the time or place, but come up and see me this afternoon, Bernard, there's sorting out to be done." The inference was obvious and, torn between euphoria and convention, Merchant was ready to burst.

Reactions were typical. Miss Manifex said, "Dead, and he's hardly forty." Little mourning, more a shred of satisfaction at being considerably over forty, alive, and likely to remain so.

Peter Genge said, "Accident. Yes it would be—that was too much car for him. He had a crash last year, remember?"

Sarah Bell said, "Wow, the Curse of Sarah. Break your neck, I said, and bingo!" Naturally Miss Manifex had to be brought up to speed, embarrassing Peter and Sarah by taking gallows humor seriously.

"There *are* more things in heaven and earth," she kept muttering until Sarah said crossly, "Give it a rest, Mannie! Have you ever considered leaving your brain to medical science? Apart from being scrambled, it must be about the size of a hen's."

Peter caught Merchant regarding Sarah in awed disgust, ob-

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viously offended by what struck him as a sick joke, and he felt superior, believing that Sarah's claim about the curse was a double bluff. She was upset and had made an instant bid to exorcise illogical guilt with a form of whistling past the graveyard.

The inquest made it clear that the timing of Rabid's death gave point to what Sarah had said. His rain-soaked remains had been found at the back of the office block late on the previous Friday night, his smashed watch showing 5:40 P.M. Like Miss Manifex, he had a favorite escape route—down fire stairs and out through an emergency door marked EMERGENCY USE ONLY leading to a loading-bay platform. From there it was only a matter of yards to the executive parking area.

Evidently he'd made a dash down the iron steps from the loading platform, tripped or skidded, and come off second best in a contest between himself and the waiting concrete. *"I wish he'd break his neck."* And evidently he had. A smear of polish on the steps matched a fresh scar on one of Rabid's gleaming shoes and his car keys lay inches from a stiffened hand—his briefcase nearby.

Reconstructing the mishap was simple. Drizzle had made the steps slick. Rabid was wearing new shoes with slippery soles, he'd just left bright lights for rainy darkness, and his hands had been full. It didn't take the coroner long to record a verdict. Fortunately, if only from the firm's viewpoint, Rupert Rabin was a bachelor and orphan, so no family sued for compensation. It was reiterated that external staircases were out of bounds to non-manual staff and Maintenance had a windfall of overtime, giving the treads anti-skid treatment.

Then everybody except Rabid got on with their lives.

Rather more than eight months after the accident, Peter Genge woke up because Sarah Bell had switched the bedside light on.

It wasn't the first time he'd slept over at her flat. Their affair had been going on since shortly after Rabid's abrupt departure. Bernard Merchant had been promoted and Peter, advanced a rung in turn, matured in a matter of days.

Sarah did not stop mocking him, but the nature and quality of banter changed until— But like Tolstoy's happy families, office romances tend to follow a pattern. Peter took her home after the firm's Christmas party, as big a cliché as one could wish for, and lingered for twenty-four hours. It played havoc with his gift-buying, but he didn't complain.

Now Sarah was sitting up in bed, her fingers laced around her

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knees, staring at him. She started without preamble as soon as his eyes focused. "Remember what I said about me and men? That loyalty would always be the least of your troubles with me—I always stick to one person at a time? I'm awfully sorry, Peter, but the time has arrived." She patted his shoulder. "You're a romantic, darling. Bad news for someone like me. If I let it go on, you'll get really hooked and it'll be that more nasty and painful and messy, all the stuff I hate." She put her feet on the rug and went out to the living room. The bedroom wasn't cold—the flat was centrally heated—but Peter felt cold.

When he joined her, she was staring out of the window. Or studying her reflection. "Why?" he pleaded.

"Because. Oh, Peter, we're not the same—not nearly. For one thing, we all have a personal model of the world, right? In mine, love is an illusion or a delusion—a crutch either way. I don't believe in it. Give it another six months and I'd be a habit with you, and your subconscious and your upbringing would bully you into believing you love me and have to do something about it—and because you believed that, it would be true. We've enjoyed each other, let's quit while we're ahead."

She was watching his reflection now. "For another thing, I'm ambitious. I don't intend to bed-hop to the top, but a little kneesie here and there, a little maybe-who-knows stuff with the hirers and firers won't do me any harm. I can't operate as a wife and I can't operate much longer as we are. We've been discreet, but Miss Manifex guesses and old Merchant saw us at that restaurant last week. News will get around and I'll be that much less eligible and I'm sorry, Peter, it matters."

Peter was learning, incredulously, that the phrase about broken hearts was not slushy, fanciful, and physically impossible. His chest was aching as though from a kick. He felt awful. "Stop it, Sarah. It's not just that, there's more to it."

The windowpane fogged as she sighed. "See? Already you've gotten too close to me, you know me too well."

"Rubbish, I know nothing about you, not really, apart from what you look like in the shower. I'm a *visitor*. There are entire chunks of your life closed to me—no-go areas. I don't even know whether you're a Young Conservative or play contract bridge three evenings a week."

"We've done that bit," she pointed out drily. "I've got a thing about personal privacy. But I didn't mean that."

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"There's something else," he said stubbornly.

Sarah reached a decision. "Sit down, Peter. No, over there—I want a bit of carpet between us." She waited until he obeyed. "I'm not the sort of person you think I am. I killed Rabid."

"Stop it! That wasn't funny last year and—"

Something in her expression silenced him. She said, "Not the so-called curse and wishing him dead. I actually killed him."

"You're off your head," Peter whispered.

"The funny part is that I'm not," she contradicted. "That's why we're different. I killed him and I meant to kill him—I did it deliberately and without regret. Oh, I regretted it like hell when I considered the price, before it was dismissed as an accident. You've no idea of the relief. I was on the rebound when our relationship started, that's *why* it started. Not on the rebound from Rabid, just the joy of escaping, getting away with it."

She smiled sadly. "Yes, Rabid and I were an item, as they say."

"But you hated his guts."

"Only at the last moment. What I said that Friday night, the famous curse—you started that. I realized you were staring at me and I was staring at Rabid as if the sun rose out of his hip pocket and it was like being caught naked in the street. So I said the first thng that occurred to me that would advertise he was nothing to me."

"I don't believe it."

"That's irrelevant," she said coolly. "Can't you see? I did kill him, and whether you believe it or not I know I did. I've wanted to tell somebody—the old wives' tales are right, one does want to make a clean breast of things. Therapy, Peter. When you believe me, and you'll have to, you'll want to stay away from me. Therapy for the pair of us."

"It's crazy. Why are you saying these things?"

"Let's not go round in circles. Think back, and you'll start understanding. That Friday night Rabid shafted Bernard Merchant with the quarterly-returns ploy. Pure devilment—he loved to keep you all jumping through hoops. When he'd had that fun, he bragged about meeting a girl and taking her to bed. That was aimed at me. Rabid did that a lot, talked a private code in public." She broke off, cleared her throat. "This isn't easy for me, Peter, but I'm willing to—expose myself—to make you see the truth.

"I think you know that one-night stands aren't my scene. Especially with Rabid, I felt my dignity and self-image threatened the

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first time he set eyes on me. I'd never involve myself with him, I thought. But he was clever, he took trouble—games players get more of a charge out of the game than the result, so in a way he couldn't lose and I couldn't win. And he was a terribly magnetic man."

"Power's a great aphrodisiac," Peter commented bitterly.

"Don't be a chump." Sarah was matter-of-fact. "Rabid was very sexy—he didn't need aphrodisiacs. One day he let me overhear his end of a phone conversation—maybe it was deliberate or maybe he just killed two birds with one stone. You see, he used the caller's name and I recognized it. He was being courted by a headhunter, one of those overseas recruiters.

"He swore me to secrecy, and in return explained what it was about—setting up a corporate division in Australia, with absolute autonomy, the right to take along his own key team. *Then* he asked me to have dinner with him. Game, set, and match." Her voice was metallic. "I wasn't a one-night stand, it lasted all of a week. In total, you understand, spread over a month or so."

"Don't do this to yourself, Sarah."

"Let me finish. It was exciting when he talked to the office in general but *at* me, and when I sneaked off to join him. But then it stopped. He put me off with every excuse except having a terrible headache." She laughed jaggedly.

"But being Rabid, he left the door ajar and I kept tapping at it. Like throwing good money after bad, I wouldn't let myself believe I'd been fooled and used. That Friday afternoon, I thought it was all on again and went dashing after him. He was waiting by the door of the loading bay, out of the rain. He acted innocent and surprised—asked what I was doing there when the bus stop was the other side of the building. I assumed he was kidding and put my hand on his arm. He shook it off. And he said—this is a verbatim quote, it's easy to remember—'Deaf as well as stupid. I'm not taking you anywhere. I told you, there's a girl waiting. You've been taken, Snooty Sarah, in every meaning of the word. You're history.' "

Having fumbled a cigarette from the box on the coffee table, Sarah looked at it as though unsure what it was for. "He didn't have to do that. Making me follow him, just to be spat on. I didn't lose my temper—I knew exactly what I was doing. I wanted to kill him and he was standing there smirking, waiting for tears. So I did it, I broke his neck. Then I rolled him off the platform and pushed his car keys and briefcase off with my foot."

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Peter didn't know what to say. "Look," he blundered, I'm sure you think that's what happened but—"

"There's this charming friend of yours with a couch. He's a great listener—how about talking it over with him?" She smiled unpleasantly. "I'm not the one out of touch with reality, darling."

Shock treatment, he thought. Scare her. "Okay, then I'll call your bluff, go to the police."

The strain in her posture and her pinched expression were vanishing as she relaxed. This time her laugh held a near-maternal note of exasperation. "You'd never do that. And if you did, the police lack manpower and time to handle current cases properly. Certified accidental death last year? Your word against mine? Because I'd deny everything."

She rose, hugging herself. "I'm going back to bed. Coming?"

Turning at the bedroom door, she saw that he hadn't moved. "I thought so," she murmured. The door closed behind her, a minuscule sound for something marking finality.

Following the initial embarrassment of meeting her in the office the following day, Peter was grateful for Sarah's attitude. She was cool but not unfriendly, laconically correct. Her manner was an implicit denial of the scene at her flat.

Sometimes he couldn't prevent himself staring at her, curious, speculative, baffled. If their eyes met, she always seemed matchingly puzzled, perhaps offended. From her raised eyebrows, she seemed to assume he was staring at a smudge on her cheek.

When the company transferred her to Scotland, both Peter and Sarah were grateful. Miss Manifex collected money for a farewell gift. Sarah wanted an electronic desk diary. Miss Manifex bought her a supremely tacky nightdress case and a cookbook as big as a telephone directory but heavier and less interesting.

As time went on, Peter decided that Sarah had to be his Most Unforgettable Character. The more he thought about her confession, if that was what it had been, the less he found it credible. Some of the cynicism was blindly illogical: people didn't kill people, especially people he knew. Further, Rupert Rabin had been what Victorians called a fine figure of a man—six-two, fleshy, not fit but relatively powerful. Sarah, in heels, hardly reached Peter's chin and he wasn't particularly tall. She couldn't have murdered Rabid. Not in the calculated sense described in her disclosure. It might just about have been possible if she'd shoved him down the stairs in an

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explosion of rage. But according to her, Rabid had been clear of the steps, sheltering from the rain, when she killed him.

That left various options, none admirable. Sarah had lied unknowingly, out of obsession and hatred, altering the past to gain belated vengeance—lied to herself. Or she'd told a subtler lie, with an element of truth: Peter was boring her and she wanted to travel faster and alone, without arguments, pleading, long-drawn-out parting negotiations. Whatever her motives, they showed her to be weird, if not sick in the head.

In hindsight, her confession struck him as neurotic, unconvincing. Another option: Sarah was attractive, but something drove her to seek added attention, to dramatize herself. Peter had never confided in anyone about the matter—it was too outrageous and bizarre, even pathetic, hardly an anecdote to be dropped into casual conversation. And anticlimactic into the bargain. *"I knew this girl once, she confessed to a murder. But she couldn't have done it."*

Gradually, mental layers built up around the irritant speck of sand that was his memory of Sarah Bell. Not many years later, married, he thought of her, when he did at all, as That Secretly Crazy Girl.

The place had been a church hall and a carpet warehouse. Now, enthusiastically though amateurishly painted, it announced itself as the Glasgow Women's Self Help & Support Unit.

The director said, "You're sure you can guarantee us two nights a week? We're desperate to reactivate the evening classes, God knows they're needed, but starting them and then getting let down can be worse than not starting at all." The volunteer was too well dressed for the director's peace of mind—middle-class guilt and boredom produced many recruits whose attention span was limited. "Frivols" she called them privately. Doubt showed on her face.

"I'm a working woman," the volunteer replied equably, "I don't take on more than I can handle or promise what I can't deliver."

The director believed her. "Good. Forgive me for looking a gift horse in the mouth, but I suppose you have some documentation to confirm that, er—"

"I'm not just talking a good fight?" The volunteer was still unruffled, amused. Opening a slim briefcase, she passed over a sheaf of papers. "Certificates in the various grades, and a letter from the superviser of the Adult College when I ran classes in my spare time

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for the Inner London Education Authority. If anything, I'm overqualified."

"Indeed you are, the director said warmly, "and welcome aboard." She beamed at the newcomer. "I'm sorry, but we do get people wasting our time. And you're such a little dot of a thing."

"That's why I took up karate while I was still at school," said Sarah Bell.

DETECTIVERSE

GOOSE EGG

by PHYLLIS WHITE

I had three little nutshells.
What the trade would bear
Bought my silver nutmeg
And my golden pear.
The men from law and order
Came to visit me
All for the sake
Of my nutshells three.

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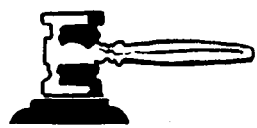
a distinguished reprint by

ROBERT HENSON

In his Introduction to Prize Stories 1974: The O. Henry Awards, *editor William Abrahams wrote of "Lizzie Borden in the P.M.," that year's second-prize winner: "Mr. Henson has boldly appropriated material of a sort that the new journalism has taken for its own: two violent murders, which actually occurred, a famous trial, Lizzie Borden's, and its aftermath; and he has shown us what richness and strangeness—art, in a word—it can be made to yield. The straightforward narrative line, the zip-zap building of suspense, and all those other* grand-guignol *touches appropriate to the case are jettisoned. Instead, with a splendid disregard for the lurid particulars of a tale told innumerable times since the Borden murders (and sung in street ballads; and danced about, too, in a famous ballet of Agnes De Mille's) he has created an intricately crisscrossed exploration of the lives of Lizzie Borden and her older sister that yet (to my way of thinking) irresistibly leads one on to a solution of the "mystery." But Mr. Henson's particular achievement is in creating a story that exists in its own right, within the margins of the story as he has written it—no matter, really, that it had its beginnings in the world of fact . . ."*



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LIZZIE BORDEN IN THE P.M.

by ROBERT HENSON

I read about her death in the local papers—it was news even here—"Lizzie Borden Again" for the last time, so to speak.

She entered the hospital under an assumed name. They knew who she was, of course, and she knew they knew. Pure Lizzie, the whole thing!

No other details—only a rehash of the murders and trial. I read just far enough to see if the dress was mentioned.

I wrote to Miss Jubb to say I'd heard. On the way home from the post office I fell and broke my hip. That same night, in the hospital, I dreamed Lizzie pushed me. I was lying on the sidewalk. "Why, Lizzie?"

She said what she had said thirty years before in Fall River jail: "You've given me away, Emma." Then she turned her face away, as she had done then, and said again: "Remember, Emma, I will never give in one inch—never!"

Well, Lizzie, you never did, I thought, waking. But neither did I, though for twelve years you kept after me.

I finally left her—moved clear away—first to Providence, then here. Miss Jubb sometimes smuggled in a bit of news—"After all, she is your sister!"—but I never saw her again.

I heard from her once, indirectly, when she threatened legal action to keep me from selling my share in the Borden Building. I knew she could have no sound business reasons, with mills closing and property values going down in Fall River. I sent word through my lawyer that I intended to proceed.

But then newspapers got wind of the suit. I made myself unavailable—Lizzie talked: Father had wanted the building to perpetuate his name—she could not conceive why I wanted to endanger family ownership—selling would be disloyal to his memory, etc.

I knew that holding onto a poor investment would be even more

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disloyal to Andrew J. Borden. However, I offered to sell my share to no one but her. I was even prepared to take a loss.

She refused: the building must be ours, not hers.

Ah, Lizzie, I thought, will you never give up?

Reporters became more numerous—the past began to exercise its fascination—I capitulated. I did not have her toleration for publicity. I knew how she would interpret my retreat, but I had never been able to prevent her misconstructions—I did not hope to now.

She dropped the suit but not all the reporters went away. A young man from the *Providence Journal* persisted. I could not evade him—my address had become too well known. Yet he was very courteous. He surprised me by asking through the screen door if the *Journal's* coverage of the trial was my reason for refusing to talk to him: "I've been reading our back files—I understand how you may feel . . ."

"No, that was before your time—I do not blame you."

"The *Journal*, I believe, was your father's favorite paper."

"Yes. Not that that helped when the time came."

"In one thing our coverage was like everyone else's—there was nothing but respect for you. Affection might be a better word," he said.

"I was not the consideration. Most papers—yours excepted—were also well disposed toward my sister."

"There was perhaps more admiration than affection for Miss Lizzie," he said, begging me not to be offended.

"Admiration for my sister is surely not something that could give offense," I said, "except perhaps to the *Journal.*"

"My erring employer!" he smiled.

I unlatched the screen. "Well, I will speak with you briefly if it will help you."

"At the time of her acquittal," he said, "it was predicted that the verdict wouldn't be acceptable to everyone—hasn't that proved true?"—"Yes, only too true."—"In all these years no one else has ever been arrested or accused or even suspected."—"Well, that is strange, but I do not blame Lizzie for that."—"It played no part in your decision to leave her?"—"I remained with her for twelve years!"—"You never had any reason yourself to find the verdict unacceptable?"—"My lips must remain sealed as to my precise reason for leaving—I remained with her," I heard myself saying, "until conditions became unbearable."

"Unbearable?"

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"And now I deserve to be left in peace."

I paid for my indiscretion. Reporters again descended. For a second time I had to call upon Miss Jubb—"It will not die!" I said. She hurried over from Fall River and helped spirit me away. She is the only person who knows my present whereabouts.

She apologized for not coming in person to tell me about Lizzie's funeral. Poor soul! she's old as I am. But I understand what she meant: if she could just tell me she could make it seem less—Lizzie. As if I expected anything else!

She wrote that Lizzie had an operation about a year ago from which she never really recovered—in fact, she felt so strongly that she was going to die that she made plans for her own funeral and left them in a sealed envelope with Helen Leighton.

Miss Leighton was her latest close friend—a young woman—from Boston, not Fall River. According to Miss Jubb, people liked her but made fun of her a little after she took up with Lizzie. She became obsessed with the idea that Fall River had mistreated Lizzie, but would maintain in the same breath that Lizzie said and did nothing to influence her.

She faithfully carried out Lizzie's last wishes: the funeral to be held at home—someone to sing "My Ain Countree"—a select list of people to be invited. Miss Jubb was one.

When the mourners arrived there was no Lizzie—only Miss Leighton pale as death. She had just learned that Lizzie had been buried the night before. Lizzie had left the undertaker instructions, too—and paid him well to keep them secret. She had not mentioned a funeral service to him. On the contrary, she specified that after the laying-out the coffin was to be closed, draped in black, and taken by night—it must be the same night—to Oak Grove cemetery. There it was to be lowered into the grave by Negroes—dressed in black. She specifically forbade any other attendants.

He had carried out her instructions to the letter, including the malicious timing.

Poor Miss Leighton! Most of the people on that select list came out of mere curiosity. She must have realized too late that Lizzie only wanted to spite them—and she would have to partly admit that they deserved it. I picture her standing in the parlor—she cannot quite condone Lizzie's action—cannot quite condemn it. People file

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past her in the awkward silence. She is just beginning to understand what was required of a friend to Lizzie Borden.

Lizzie did not exchange class rings with a friend when she graduated from high school. She gave hers to Father. We had just got home from the exercises. "I want you to wear it always."

Father was not sentimental but he was always solicitous of Lizzie's feelings. Perhaps he felt that she had been more disturbed by Mother's death than I was, though she was only two at the time, while I was twelve. And she was only four when he remarried—she found it natural to call Abby "Mother." I did not, and received permission to use her first name. A few years before the murders, we both changed to "Mrs. Borden."

Lizzie soon found that attempts to treat her as a mother only embarrassed and alarmed her. From the beginning, she could scarcely be prevailed upon to go out of the house or do anything in it except eat. She took to staying upstairs as much as possible—she would come down only for meals or between-meals foraging. Her weight, before many years passed, made even these descents laborious.

Lizzie turned back to me—she came to dislike Mrs. Borden intensely. I did not. I just could never grow fond of her—of her sloth, her physical grossness. I compared her to Mother and found her wanting. I did not, however, think of her as coming between Father and me. The older Lizzie grew, the more she behaved as if every token of affection for Mrs. Borden were stolen from her. She fought back.

Father said he would attach the ring to his watch chain "No, you must wear it on your finger!"—he said it was too small—"Then wear it on your small finger!"—he started to put it on his right hand—"Not that hand, Father!" I remember how he hesitated—the least thing was liable to send her off into one of her peculiar spells—then, silently, he worked the ring onto the small finger of his left hand. It clashed unavoidably with his wedding band. Abby said never a word. I saw her a few minutes later groaning up the stairs with a mutton sandwich, a wedge of apple pie, and a pitcher of iced tea with half an inch of sugar boiling up from the bottom.

When Lizzie was excited her eyes seemed to grow larger and paler—color and expression would drain away—she would stare hard, but at something no one else could see. The effect was not

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pleasant, though reporters at the trial found it "incandescent," "hypnotizing," and so on—descriptions she cherished. No one found the mottling of her skin attractive. Even as a girl Lizzie did not blush in the usual sense—blood rising in her face would not blend with the pallor of her skin but fought an ugly battle all along her jaw and straggled out in her cheeks. Often when these signs of inner emotion were most evident her voice and manner would indicate total self-possession: "I have received Mr. Robinson's bill. Twenty-five thousand dollars. I will not pay it."

Noting the inner stress, I did not mention her new house on French Street nor any of the other extravagances that had followed her acquittal far more quickly than Mr. Robinson's fee.

"I thought he was my friend—he called me his little girl."

"He saved your life, Lizzie."

She stared. "I was innocent, was I not?"

"Mr. Robinson made the jury see it."

"You did not think it was self-evident?"

"It is not a matter of what I thought."

"Well, I won't pay it! I won't be robbed, I won't be blackmailed!"

"Blackmailed!"

"Don't you see the dilemma Mr. Robinson is trying to put me in? No innocent person would be charged such a fee. If I pay, it will be said that I bought an acquittal."

"And if you don't?"

"That I wasn't willing to pay for one."

I hardly knew where to begin. "Why would he create such a dilemma?"

"You can't guess?"

"No."

"Mr. Robinson doesn't believe me innocent," she said flatly. "This is his way of saying so. I will not pay it!"

Either then or later—for we went over and over every point—she said: "You look so downcast, Emma. If it will make you feel better, you may pay him."

"How could it make me feel better, unless you lacked the money?"

"True," she said. "And you've had enough expenses from the trial as it is."

"I? I have had no expenses."

"Yes," she said, staring hard, "it is common knowledge."

Either then or later, when I wearied of playing games, I asked bluntly: "Are you speaking of Bridget?"

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"Yes—of the way she dressed at the trial—her ticket back to Ireland—the farm she bought there. She couldn't possibly have saved enough from the wages Father paid her."

"Servant-girls may believe she was bribed," I said sharply, "but no sensible person does."

"No sensible person believes that Bridget couldn't recall what dress I was wearing that morning, or whether I had changed from cotton to silk."

"If she remembered and chose not to tell, it was because she did not think the matter important. Her silence did not become an expense."

She opened her fan and looked at me over the edge. It was Mr. Robinson who persuaded her to carry a black fan during the trial. She had never used one before but so much attention was paid to it that she was never afterward without one. To my occasional annoyance: "Put that away. Coyness does not become either of us. I will tell you now that I made arrangements to help Bridget financially during the trial. She was, after all, unemployed for almost a year. She chose to spend the money on showy dresses—that was indiscreet, but I was not bribing her and therefore had no right to object. However it may have looked, my conscience was clear. When the trial was over she wanted to go home—that is natural—and Ireland is her home."

"It is all so easily explained, yet you have never explained it before."

"It was my own affair."

"Oh, Emma," she suddenly said in a tone of peculiar satisfaction, "you are not a good liar! You believe I changed from the cotton to the silk that morning! You believe Bridget lied when she said she couldn't remember!"

"Lizzie, Lizzie! if you say you wore the silk all morning, I believe you. If Bridget lied when she said she could not remember anything to the contrary, she lied upon her own motion. The money I gave her was not a bribe!"

"It was a reward."

"It was neither—it was a simple gift!"

She would not pay Mr. Robinson but I found her at work on a gift for Mr. Moody. I thought at first she was adding to her own scrapbook of clippings and memorabilia of the trial. Then I saw two police photographs mounted opposite each other—Father—half sliding off

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the couch—profile streaked with blood—Mrs. Borden—wedged between the bed and bureau—feet awkwardly splayed . . .

"Where—how—did you get these?"

"I asked for them. Oh, not for myself—" and she showed me the flyleaf: "For Mr. William Moody, as a memento of an interesting occasion."

"Lizzie, you cannot!"

"It's a duplicate of my own—except for those additions."

"Oh, Lizzie, at the very least this is not in good taste!" For some reason the remark made her laugh out loud. I persisted: "It is—inappropriate—it will seem that you are taunting him."

"Not at all," she replied, fetching string and wrapping paper. "Mr. Moody is a young man on the threshold of his career. Even though he lost this case, his connection with it cannot but help him. He will be grateful."

The assistant prosecuting attorney!

That time the house was broken into—in broad daylight—about a year before the murders—the police questioned and questioned Bridget. A little gold watch and some jewelry were missing from Mrs. Borden's dressing table. She discovered the theft when she returned from one of her rare outings, a drive with Father to Swansea. The rest of us had been home all day—none of us heard any suspicious noises. It was Lizzie who discovered how the thief got in: someone had left the cellar door unbolted—the lock had been picked with a nail—Lizzie pointed to it still hanging in the keyhole.

The police came back next day to question Bridget further. Maybe she had opened the cellar door for an accomplice . . . Lizzie had to be sent to her room—she could not stop talking and interfering. Father had already asked the police not to release news of the theft to the papers—now he asked them to drop the investigation altogether. "You will never catch the real thief . . ." The word "real" struck me as odd at the time, but I believe he was trying to let the police know that he had no suspicion at all of Bridget.

That night he locked and bolted the door between Lizzie's bedroom and the one he and Mrs. Borden used. It had never been locked before, it was never unlocked again.

I knew Lizzie would forgive Father anything—I braced myself for an attack on Mrs. Borden for that silent accusation. Instead she seemed to put the matter completely out of her mind.

But a few weeks later, while Alice Russell was paying a visit,

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Lizzie suddenly began a rambling account of the theft. Alice had not heard of it before—after a few questions she fell tactfully silent. Lizzie said Father had been right to call off the investigation. Robberies so bold yet limited in scope (nothing taken but what belonged to Mrs. Borden!) could seldom be solved. Even the police said so. All we could do was try to prevent a repetition—as she had done by putting a lock on her side of the door. If a thief came up the backstairs again, he would no longer be able to pass from Father's room into hers and so to the front of the house . . .

I heard this in startled silence. Later I checked. There indeed on Lizzie's side of the door was a shiny new lock.

Of the people who dropped away after the trial I missed Alice Russell most of all—she had been my best friend. Lizzie once made the astonishing suggestion that I exchange calls with her again.

"You know I cannot do that, Lizzie."

"Why not?—unless you have some quarrel I don't know about."

"We have not quarrelled, for we have not spoken since she testified against you."

She was toying with her fan. "She did not testify against me. She told what she saw. It could not hurt me."

I said wanly, "I wonder that you can put it out of your memory so easily."

"Well," she said negligently, "what did she have to tell except that she saw me tearing up an old dress? But you saw me, too—you knew the dress. When I told you I was going to burn it, you said, 'Yes, why don't you?' "

"In that," I said bitterly, "I had to contradict her."

"Is she angry about that? She can't be so petty!"

"I do not know how she feels."

"If she wanted her reputation for accuracy to go unchallenged, she shouldn't have waited three months before telling her story."

I could have wept. "Out of fondness for me, Lizzie! When she could bear it no longer she sent to beg my forgiveness!"

"Ah, now I understand a little better your desire not to see her again," Lizzie said on that note of satisfaction I was learning to dread. "She needn't have implicated you."

"She did not implicate me."

"Forced you to contradict her, then."

"You did that! I told about the dress-burning the way you remembered it."

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She rose and walked about the room, opening and shutting her fan. "Why did you let me burn it, Emma, when you still believed I had changed?"

According to Alice I had tried—I had not said, "Why don't you?" but "I would not do that if I were you!" She was coming back from church—on Sunday after the murders on Thursday—I let her in the back door—followed her through the entry into the kitchen—Lizzie was standing between the stove and the coal closet—she had a blue dress in her hand—with brown stains on the skirt. I knew she had stained a blue dress with brown paint several months earlier—several times she had mentioned throwing it away. I also knew the police were looking for a blue dress with blood stains on it. I could have said either, "I would not do that if I were you" or "Why don't you?" Either.

"Alice may resent my contradicting her testimony," I said, "but she would never misinterpret my reasons for doing so."

"Do you think that I do?"

I would not answer.

She was never satisfied if I said I did not remember, or had not been paying attention, or had lost my way in the technicalities, contradictions, details . . . Yet when Mr. Moody opened for the prosecution I remember thinking, So there it all is—so *that's* their side, just as if nine months had not gone by, with an inquest and preliminary investigation. Mr. Robinson could bring tears to my eyes but I could seldom apply what he was saying to the point at hand. Mr. Moody was mercilessly clear and orderly. Watching Lizzie during his presentation, I thought, Innocence alone can account for that detached expression.

Only when he came to the very end did her eyes and complexion show a change. The case against her, he said, had always had a weapon, a motive, and an opportunity. The real puzzle had been the absence of a blood-stained dress. He promised to clear up this mystery—the prosecution would present new testimony by a witness who had seen Lizzie burning a bloody garment!

I felt my blood turn to ice—Alice was going to testify. Lizzie opened her fan—shut it. In later years, sensational journalism had her swooning virtually every day. In fact she did so only once. Just as Mr. Moody finished and started for his table she fainted dead away.

Mr. Moody's triumph was short-lived. In the days following, so many rulings from the bench favored the defense that he was rumored to have urged the District Attorney to withdraw from the

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case—throw the responsibility for freeing Lizzie upon the Court. There was much ugly comment upon the fact that the presiding judge was one of Mr. Robinson's appointees when Mr. Robinson was governor of the state. The District Attorney, however, did not withdraw. Apparently he did not feel as strongly as Mr. Moody that the trial was a mockery of justice.

Still, it was not to him that Lizzie sent her "memento of an interesting occasion."

Eventually she paid Mr. Robinson but announced that her door would be closed to him. Not that he had ever made any attempt to call. Neither had Mr. Jennings, her other lawyer, our family lawyer. After we moved up on the hill, he simply dropped away.

The house seemed far too large to me, but Lizzie said she planned to entertain extensively and would need room. She was no longer content with one maid—she engaged a "staff"—a housekeeper, a second maid, a cook, a Negro coachman. What, I wondered silently, will I do with myself all day?

One afternoon I came back from shopping and found a workman carving the word "Maplecroft" on the front doorstep. I broke my silence.

"What is this?"—"The name I've given the house."—"What does it mean?"—"It doesn't mean anything, I simply like the sound of it."—"You are making a mistake."—"In what way?"—"Naming a house will be thought inappropriate, in bad taste."—"By whom?"—"Everyone, and especially those whom you would least like to think it."

"Dearest Emma," she said, "you can only mean yourself. And while I value your opinion, you're too close to me to realize that I can't be what I was before."

"No, you cannot. More is now expected."

"Well, that is my point," she said, and would discuss it no further.

But people who accuse Lizzie of "social climbing" because she bought the house on French Street do not understand that Father could have moved up on the hill at any time—he would only have been taking his place among his peers. But he was not concerned with external signs of his standing. Lizzie's hints and pleas fell on deaf ears.

It was the only thing he would not do for her—he sent her on the Grand Tour—paid dressmakers' bills without complaint—stretched her allowance with gifts of money . . . This generosity somewhat

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contradicted his basic nature but I never resented it. In such things as property and stocks he treated us equally, and he praised me where he could never have praised her—for wise management. He took both of us into his business confidence, however. I can recall only one time when he did not—and that was when he put a house in Mrs. Borden's name without telling us. We learned of it only by accident.

Lizzie was extraordinarily agitated: "She has persuaded him to go behind our backs! He would never have done this by himself!"

I agreed it was unlike him.

"What shall we do?"

I said we could do nothing except hope it would not happen again. That was not enough for Lizzie: "I shall let her know what I think of her!" She ceased to call her Mother. She went further—she would speak if they met but would not talk. Her silences were brooding—palpable—disquieting even to me. Mrs. Borden was clearly miserable, though her appetite was unaffected.

Father found a rental duplex and put it in our names. It was worth to each of us exactly what Mrs. Borden's house was worth. I was astounded by the crudeness of this attempt to atone for his secrecy and favoritism. Lizzie responded by refusing to take any more meals with him and Mrs. Borden. The house was heavy with tension.

He came to me for help. I had always had the room adjoining his and Mrs. Borden's. It was larger than Lizzie's, better furnished, and cheerier with two windows on the south. It fell to me when we first moved to Second Street only because I was the older. Now Father asked if I would exchange with Lizzie.

I said, "Yes, if you think it will raise her spirits."

But he would not directly admit his motive: "She has to go through your room to reach the hall closet. She shouldn't always be disturbing you."

True, eighteen or twenty of her dresses hung in the hall closet—her own would not hold them all. I said, "It is a considerate suggestion."

"I want you to offer it as your own," he said in his driest voice.

I thought for a moment. "She will not be deceived."

"Will you do it?"

"Well, I will say that the subject came up and that we agreed on the idea."

As I did. But he did not profit much from the exchange. Close on its heels came the daylight robbery. By then I was taking my meals with Lizzie and had ceased to call Mrs. Borden by her first name . . .

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I had nothing to do the livelong day—I began to occupy myself at Central Congregational. Lizzie was scathing: "You've become a regular pew-warmer, Emma. You never were before. Why this sudden compulsion?"

"I am under no compulsion. I go freely."

"But you can't stay away freely, that's the point!"

I did not answer.

She leaned her cheek on her fan and gazed at me poignantly: "Perhaps Miss Jubb is your reason. If so, why not say it? I know you need someone besides me."

I ached to hold her in my arms at that moment, comfort her, as when she was a child and had no mother but Emma. I had never cultivated the people who rallied round her during her trouble—I did not feel neglected when they dropped away. She seethed as if from an injustice.

For ten months the people we now lived among but seldom saw had made her their special care. They extolled her in the press as a person of the highest character and most delicate sensibilities—charged that she was being sacrificed to inept police performance and indifferent law enforcement—called her a martyr to low-bred envy or political opportunism—the scapegoat periodically demanded by the moneyless and propertyless. Mrs. Holmes, Mrs. Brayton, Mrs. Almy, and their like kept her cell filled with fresh flowers. Only persons with influence obtained seats in the courtroom—and how many of them female! What a murmur of feminine admiration went up when she entered the first day in her dress of severest black but latest fashion—great leg-of-mutton sleeves—ruching of black lace—a black-lace hat to set off the pallor of her face. And from one hand (the other lay on Reverend Buck's arm) drooped the quickly famous long black fan.

When the words "Not guilty" were at last pronounced these same admirers wept, fainted, sank to their knees in prayers of thanksgiving. Mrs. Holmes gave a splendid reception. All the people Lizzie had always admired were there to admire her. How could she escape the conclusion that she had done something for them?

We returned to Second Street next day. While we waited for the housekeeper to answer the bell, Lizzie kept glancing about. Only yesterday forty reporters or more were vying for her attention, people holding up children for her to kiss . . . Now the street was deserted.

We went in. I made a move toward the parlor but Lizzie walked

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straight ahead to the sitting room. She did not seem to notice the bare space along the wall—left by the couch where Father had been hacked to death. She was taking the pins out of her hat. "Do take another peek outside, Emma. Someone may be there."

I refused. "It is over," I said.

Gradually she saw that it was, though in more ways than the one I meant. She did not ask why—she retaliated. Formerly she had been a mainstay of Central Congregational—now she said spitefully, "Let Mariana Holmes find someone else to cook and serve dinners for newsboys!"

Reverend Buck tried without much enthusiasm to reconcile her, then turned the task over to his assistant. Reverend Jubb was more solicitous, going so far as to bring his sister with him each time. But after two visits Lizzie refused to come downstairs. I was their only catch.

"Aren't you afraid someone will think you are trying to atone for something?" Lizzie asked with a disagreeable smile.

Her other guess, about Miss Jubb, was closer. If I helped with the Christmas dinner for newsboys or kept accounts for the Fruit-and-Flower Mission, the reason was Miss Jubb's friendship. That and the fact that I had nothing to do all day long—except think.

Their clothing lay in a heap in the cellar for three days, then the police gave me permission to bury it—behind the stable—with an officer watching. Then I scrubbed the blood off the doorjamb downstairs—the baseboard upstairs—thinking, So little here, so much on their clothes . . . Father's had spurted forward—only one splash hit the doorjamb by his head—the murderer might have entirely escaped being spattered. But he had straddled Mrs. Borden's body, they said, after felling her with the first blow—he could scarcely have avoided stains below the knees. Yet her blood shot forward, too—onto the baseboard—so possibly he could have walked along the street without attracting attention—once he got out of the house . . .

It was their clothing that was soaked—pools of blood had spread out on the floor. Lizzie's shoes and stockings were spotless—so was her blue-silk dress. There had been no cries or sounds of struggle to alert her. Both died with the very first blow, medical examiners said. The senseless hacking that followed was—just that.

I had been at the seashore. Alice met me at the station, all in

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tears. Lizzie was waiting at home, dry-eyed. I do not know why she sent for Alice instead of one of her own friends upon discovering Father's body. It was poor Alice who went upstairs and found Mrs. Borden.

In the carriage she said: "Lizzie came to see me last night—burst in, really. I felt quite concerned—she looked, well, distraught. She said she was depressed and wanted to talk to someone—she said she couldn't shake off the feeling that something terrible was going to happen—she felt as if she should sleep with her eyes open . . . Shall I mention all this, Emma?"

"It will come out."

I never asked, never hinted that Alice should either speak or be silent on any matter. She stayed with us the entire week following the murders. So much of what she told me before Lizzie was arrested is mixed up in my mind with what she told afterward in court. Was it when she met me at the station, or later, that she mentioned a bundle on the floor of my closet? Detectives had been searching for a murder weapon, she said, but they had been very considerate—they had not turned things completely upside down. In my room they had not even disturbed the bundled-up blanket in the closet . . . I could not think what she meant—I left no such bundle—I found none when I got home.

Mrs. Borden had received twenty blows, all from behind—Father ten. He had been taking a nap—one side of his face had been sliced away—the eye sliced in half. In the coffin, that side was pressed into the pillow. Lizzie bent down and kissed the upturned cheek. Her ring was still on his little finger.

Crowds lined the route to the cemetery. The hush was eerie. When Lizzie stepped out of the carriage at the gate it was possible to hear someone whisper, "She's not wearing black!"

It was like a portent of the future. I asked her if the printer had made an error when I saw "Lisbeth Borden" on her new calling cards. She had never been called anything but Lizzie.

"It's not an error. Lisbeth is my name now, and you must call me by it."—"I cannot do that."—"You mean you will not."—"Is it a legal change?"—"You know it isn't."—"Then of what use is it?"—"Oh, *use!*"—"Very well, for what reason at all do you wish to take a different name?"

She was silent, then with a curious little smile she said, "I'll tell

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you—if you'll tell me why you've taken to wearing nothing but black."

"There is no mystery in that."

"Surely you're not still in mourning."

"Not mourning exactly. I have never cared much for clothes. You know that. These now seem appropriate."

"That is becoming your favorite word."

"I am a limited person."

"Then this is a permanent change in your dress?"

"I have not thought of it that way—it may be."

"Well, and I'm changing my name!"

"The two things are not the same."

"True—they aren't. You must take care that your black doesn't begin to look like penance," said Lisbeth of Maplecroft.

She purchased one of the first automobiles in Fall River. I had only Miss Jubb's description of it—"long, black, like the undertaker's limousine." The Negro who had been her coachman, or perhaps another, became her chauffeur. She could be seen every day going for a drive, looking neither left nor right but staring straight ahead. By then her ostracism was complete. All too appropriately had "Maplecroft" been carved on her doorstep by a man from the tombstone works.

I went to her coachman after the unpleasantness over the book and asked him bluntly if he had been a party to it. A certain journalist had compiled an account of the case from his daily reports, court transcripts, and so forth, and was giving it the sensational title *Fall River Tragedy*. It was supposed to clear up some "doubts" that Lizzie herself had stonily refused to clear up. Fall River was agog with anticipation—the outside world, too, it was said, though the printing was being done locally. Lizzie was several times observed entering and leaving the shop. It was assumed that she was threatening legal action. But on publication day the printer announced that Miss Borden had bought up the entire printing and had it carted away the night before.

"Did you help her?"—"She say I help her?"—"The printer said she came with some Negro assistants—he couldn't identify them."—"Miss Lisbeth know what she doin' if she get colored mens . . ."

I caught the note of admiration—it was Bridget all over again. "If she changed her dress you must tell Mr. Jennings," I said.

"Lizzie may be foolishly afraid that innocent stains will incrimi-

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nate her," Mr. Jennings patiently explained. "But to a jury a perfectly clean dress may seem more suspicious."

"A silk dress, Bridget!—heavy silk for house wear!—on the hottest day of the year!"

"If she changed from her cotton and don't want to tell, I daresay she has her reasons," Bridget said, addressing Mr. Jennings. " 'Twouldn't be foolishness—not her."

"A pool of blood had dripped from the sofa when she discovered her father," said Mr. Jennings, "yet not even her hem was stained. It might be *very* foolish to maintain that."

"I can't see how me backin' up her own statement can harm her," Bridget said stubbornly. "Besides, all I'm really sayin' is, I don't *remember* what she was wearin'."

Mr. Jennings was still not easy in his mind—he went to Lizzie and pleaded with her not to conceal anything that might damage her case later. He was explicit.

She retaliated by replacing him with Mr. Robinson—but blamed me for undermining his faith in her innocence. She was lying on a cot when the matron let me in after their interview. "You have given me away, Emma."—"I only told him what I thought he ought to know for your defense."—"Bridget's word wasn't enough?"—"Bridget did not say you hadn't changed, only that she could not remember."—"And you persuaded Mr. Jennings that that wasn't enough! upon what grounds? upon what grounds?"—"Upon grounds of common sense."

She turned her face to the wall: "I will never give in one inch—never!"

Nor did Bridget, though subjected to great pressure on the witness stand. Lizzie was wearing a blue dress but whether it was cotton or silk she did not remember. Her steadfastness deserved our gratitude, I thought, but as for bribing her, I might as well be accused of buying the coachman's silence! "Were the books destroyed?"—"Miss Lisbeth know best about that."—"Did any escape? were any saved back?"—"She know best about that."

After Alice testified that she saw Lizzie pulling a blue dress out of the coal closet that Sunday morning, Mr. Moody asked me if we usually kept our ragbag there. The question was excluded. I could easily have answered: no, we kept the ragbag in the pantry, for cleaning cloths and such. Lizzie probably got the dress out and tossed it into the coal closet, next to the stove, while she made a fire. Mr.

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Moody asked why Lizzie was burning the dress at all if we kept a ragbag. Excluded. I could have said: well, we didn't save every scrap! He asked if Lizzie usually disposed of old clothes by burning them in sweltering August heat. Excluded.

When I saw her there by the stove I didn't really think of *how* she was disposing of the dress, only of the fact that she was *doing* it, and that it might look suspicious. I might very well have said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you!" And yet I knew she had a blue-cotton dress she had been planning to throw away. She was holding the dress so that the paint-stains didn't show, but it was the same one.

For all I knew it had been in the ragbag for weeks! I could just as easily have said, "Yes, why don't you?"

Under siege, as it were, we pulled the blinds and spoke to no one but each other.

"Where are the books? Have they been destroyed?"

"You needn't worry. I paid well."

"It was the worst thing you could have done!"

"Yes—to the hypocritical."

"How could the book have hurt you? It could only show your innocence."

"Oh," she said with an ugly smile, "people are no longer interested in that—if they ever were."

"Then this latest act will give them confort."

"This *latest* act!" she mocked.

"Why do you torture yourself?"

"Why have you stopped sitting on the porch in the evening?"

I did not answer. She recited coldly:

"Lizzie Borden took an axe,
Gave her mother forty whacks,
When she saw what she had done,
She gave her father forty-one."

I shuddered. "You have heard the singing from the shrubbery," she said with her peculiar relish. "You have heard the taunts."

"Urchins—from under the hill."

"All the hill listens."

"What has this to do with the book!" I cried.

Her eyes had gone pale. "The book—why, if they want that, they must come to me."—"You saved copies then?"—"They must admit they are fascinated . . ."

Over and over every point! Twelve years of it! What she would

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not tolerate from outsiders, she required of me: "Do you think Father really planned to give Swansea to her?"

"I do not know."

"He knew how much it meant to us—all the summers we spent there, from childhood on—until she came along and spoiled it."

"I should be surprised if he made the same mistake twice. He had already seen the consequences of one such secret transaction."

"If you *had* known, though, or even suspected, you'd have told me, wouldn't you? You wouldn't let me learn by accident?"

I would not answer. About two weeks before the murders I had heard some such rumor, but I was preparing to leave for the seaside and had no desire to upset her with anything so vague.

Either then or later (for she could not be satisfied) she said: "Suppose I had discovered such a plot—overheard them discussing it, say—if I had come to you, what would you have done?"

"Done?"

"Or suggested."

"I would have said what I said before: we can do nothing."

"Nothing—" she echoed restlessly.

"I mean, we could not undo Father's decision."

"We could have shown our displeasure again—more strongly! We could have moved away, left them—left *her*, with her everlasting gorging and grasping!"

"I had no wish to leave Father."

"He had driven the wedge."

"I did not blame him. He could not have foreseen her unsuitability."

"But dwelling with such an impasse! Surely there were times when you felt you could bear it no longer!"

"I was more content then than I am now."

Yes, I said to the young man from the *Journal*, the lack of motive is puzzling, but no one who really knew Lizzie would believe that money or property could be *her* motive if she were guilty. She was not acquisitive—that is a vulgar error.

How well I remember Mr. Moody's question after he had listened to an explanation of her break with Mrs. Borden.

"A house put in her name? Is that all? There was no more to it than that?"

Even he detected that property was insufficient as an explanation . . .

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Perhaps it was unjust that a kind of obsession with Lizzie grew up right alongside the isolation of her. Perhaps she could not have prevented it. But from the day of her acquittal she adamantly refused to reassure her admirers. Questions they had been willing to suspend during her ordeal they must be willing to suspend forever. Of that, at least, she left them in no doubt. Not that anyone ever challenged her directly, she said irritably.

"Well, they are friends, not lawyers. They are waiting until you are ready."

"Ready? I should like to know one topic upon which you think I ought to set their minds at rest."

I had one on the tip of my tongue but suppressed it: "No, that is for you to decide."

And so the questions remained. "Where was your sister during the murders?" Thirty years later! The very question I had bitten back! The first one I asked when I returned from the seaside!

"Her whereabouts were established at the trial," I said to the reporter. I could still see Mr. Moody exhibiting his plan of the house and yard. The front door was locked—the intruder had to come in the back—pass to the front—go upstairs to kill Mrs. Borden—come down to kill Father—escape out the back again—all without being seen or heard by either Lizzie or Bridget. And between the two deaths, an hour and a half gone by . . .

He traced Bridget's movements with a pointer: working outside when Mrs. Borden died—taking a nap in her room in the garret when Father died. But where was Lizzie when Mrs. Borden died? Ironing in the kitchen? How did the murderer manage to slip past her? Somewhere else on the ground floor? How did he muffle the crash of a two-hundred-pound body overhead? Why did she hear no cries, no sounds of struggle? Where did the murderer hide during that hour and a half before Father came home and lay down for a nap? And where was Lizzie when the second hacking to death took place? I could still hear Mr. Moody's relentless mockery of the defense: "Eating a pear—in the loft of the barn!—where she had gone to find a piece of screenwire!—in a heavy silk dress!—in one-hundred-degree heat!"

"There were contradictions at the trial," said the reporter. "I mean, did she ever explain to *your* satisfaction where she was?"

"My satisfaction was not the question."

The dress was immaculate when the police arrived. No blood on the hem, no dust from the loft . . .

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She had a telephone installed at "Maplecroft." It was of little use to her and proved a trap to me. She had begun to take short trips out of town, staying for a day, sometimes overnight, in Boston or Providence . . . On these occasions I would sometimes ring up Miss Jubb and invite her to bring her work over. One day while we were cozily occupied in my room, crocheting doilies for a church bazaar, Lizzie returned unexpectedly from Providence. I heard her speaking to the maid. I rose without haste and went to the head of the stairs. She had already started up. I remember her fur cape and her hat with the iridescent birds-wings. Her muff, oddly enough, was stuffed into her reticule.

"Miss Jubb is here, Lizzie," I said firmly. "Won't you come say hello?"

She brushed past me—she seemed distracted, breathless: "In a moment . . ."

"She is taking off her things," I told Miss Jubb, but my face betrayed me. She started to put away her work: "Perhaps she does not feel well . . ."

At that moment Lizzie swept into the room—color high—eyes luminous—both hands extended.

"Dear Miss Jubb, how very nice to see you! I've been hoping you'd call!" For the next five minutes she chattered torrentially. Miss Jubb sent me so many gratified glances that I was forced to bend my eyes upon my crocheting. "You came back early. Did you finish all your shopping?"

"Oh, yes—or rather, no. After Tilden's I let the rest go."

"Tilden's have such lovely things," sighed Miss Jubb, who could not afford any of them.

"Shall I show you what I bought there?" cried Lizzie. She hurried out and returned with two porcelain paintings. One was called "Love's Dream," the other "Love's Awakening." Miss Jubb went into raptures over them. Lizzie said effusively: "I meant them for my wall but now I have a different plan. One will be yours, the other Emma's, as a reminder to you of your friendship. You shall not refuse me!"

Miss Jubb burst into tears. For some time she had been hinting that I kept her away from Lizzie unnecessarily. I was unpleasantly reminded of other times when Lizzie pressed gifts on people, but, reproaching myself, I said that if Miss Jubb would accept her porcelain, I would accept mine. Blushing, she chose "Love's Dream" as

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more appropriate for herself. Lizzie laughed heartily: "Well, Emma, appropriate or not, that leaves 'Love's Awakening' to you!"

Not that it mattered. Miss Jubb broke hers while fastening it to the wall. Too embarassed to say anything, even to me, she made a trip to Providence to have it repaired. At Tilden's the manager was summoned. When had she purchased this painting? "It was a gift." From whom? "Why, Lizzie Borden . . ." Then she learned that the two porcelains had disappeared, unpaid-for, on the day of Lizzie's shopping trip.

Fall River woke to the headline "Lizzie Borden Again!"

Tilden's sent a detective with a warrant. Lizzie talked agitatedly with him, then came upstairs to me and said—so great was her confusion—"We must call Mr. Jennings right away!"

"An attorney is not necessary," I said. "Tilden's will not prosecute you if you go talk the matter over with them. You have been a good customer for many years."

"They have no grounds!" she began, then broke off. In a moment she said, "Well, then, I shall go to Providence. I couldn't have taken the paintings without paying for them, but who will believe me?"

"Are you certain you have no receipt?"

"Yes. I seldom pay cash at Tilden's—I forgot all about a receipt."

"The clerk will have a record, a duplicate."

"No," she said, staring, "if anything it was the clerk who perpetrated this fraud—by slipping the paintings into my reticule."

"But, Lizzie, you remember paying for them!"

"I mean, he slipped them in to make me overlook the receipt."

He slipped them inside your muff, I thought, suddenly weary of trying to believe her.

Her jaw had mottled slightly: "And Miss Jubb played right into his hands."

"Miss Jubb is not to blame," I said angrily. "Miss Jubb has been greatly mortified!"

"I'm only saying that she gave the clerk his chance to raise a hue-and-cry against me."

"He would have done that the first day," I said with a cruelty I could not control, "if all he wanted was to have his name linked with that of Lizzie Borden."

She fell silent for a moment. "You're not coming with me, then? I must settle with Tilden's alone?"

"The purchase was yours alone."

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"When I come back," she said, "the paintings will still be yours and Miss Jubb's."

As soon as she left the house I found a hammer—I broke "Love's Awakening" to bits.

In the spring before that terrible August, Father went out to the stable with a hatchet. Lizzie's pigeons had been attracting mischievous boys. Tools—feed—pieces of harness had been disappearing. To discourage marauders, Father beheaded the pigeons.

I began to think of leaving her.

The nurse asked today if there was anyone I wanted to get in touch with—just for company, she said, now that the doctor has decided I must not leave the hospital—"not for a while."

I said there was no one but asked to see the doctor as soon as he was free. I knew what her question really meant.

And yet I procrastinated—for I knew that if I ever left Fall River I would not come back. Lizzie could not stay away. Her trips became more frequent, more prolonged—not only Boston and Providence but New York—Philadelphia—Washington. But after a week, or two weeks, or a month away, she would return—Lizzie Borden would be seen again in Fall River.

Playbills showed how she occupied herself when her shopping was done. She did not discuss this new interest with me—I learned about her friendship with Nance O'Neil from the newspaper—inexorably "Lizzie Borden Again" arrived.

A lawsuit against Miss O'Neil would have been news in any case, a popular actress sued by her manager to recover advances and loans. But add that Lizzie Borden appeared every day in court as her champion—that Lizzie Borden hired the lawyer who was defending her—that Lizzie Borden had given her the little gold watch that was pinned to her bosom!

She came home during a recess in the case. I had not seen her for a month. She had been at a resort hotel near Boston. According to the newspapers, she had met Miss O'Neil there, taking refuge from the cupidity of her manager. She warned me in provocative words not to tamper with Miss O'Neil's portrait of herself as a woman wronged, misunderstood, persecuted—just the kind of woman, in effect, that she was best known for portraying on the stage. "She is

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a gifted and sadly maligned young woman. The manager has used her ruthlessly. I will not desert her!"

"I have not suggested that you should. I know nothing about her, the case, or your friendship—except what anyone can know."

She opened and shut her fan.

"As for the newspapers, she is not ashamed to have her name linked with Lizzie Borden's."

"To which of you is that a compliment?"

"When we first met she knew me by the name I use at hotels for the sake of privacy. I merely presented myself as an admirer, someone who had seen all her plays. Later I had to tell her that the person who wished to befriend her was not Lisabeth Andrews but Lizzie Borden. She said, 'But, my dear, I've known that all along! It makes no difference to me.' "

I said nothing. She toyed with her fan. "The remark doesn't dispose you in her favor?"

"Why should it? Such professions cost her nothing but you a great deal."

"Oh, *cost!*" she said harshly. Then her tone softened: "Poor Emma! Some things are worth paying for, others aren't. You've never learned the difference."

"I have not had good teachers," I said.

After the suit was settled, Lizzie continued to rescue her from small debts and indulge her taste for trinkets and jewelry. Miss O'Neil repaid her by introducing her to "artistic" people and consulting her (or pretending to) on personal and professional matters. I accused myself of small-mindedness. I still had Miss Jubb, she had not deserted me—why should I begrudge Lizzie this friendship, sorely in need as she was?

So when she announced that Miss O'Neil's company had been engaged for a performance in Fall River and that she was entertaining them afterward, I said briskly, "Then I'm to meet Miss O'Neil at last!"

"There's time for you to make other plans," she said. "I know you don't approve of artists—"

"I do not know any artists," I interrupted. "If I did I would judge them on individual merits, not as a group."

"Dearest Emma," she said, "I've always been able to count on you . . ."

I felt a familiar dread . . .

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Caterers, florists, musicians came and went. "Maplecroft" was finally going to serve its function. Only, from my window, there was not a soul to be seen on the street unless someone delivering ice—potted palms—a grand piano . . . Not even any children hanging around the front gate in a spirit of anticipation—their mothers had swept them out of sight.

I tried to help—once I went downstairs in time to collide with a delivery of wine. "Oh, don't look so stricken, Emma! It's champagne, not gin!" I thought of all those years she'd worked for the Temperance Union—how they had held prayer meetings for her during the trial. She read my mind. "Don't worry, I'm not going to break my pledge. Only my guests aren't used to lemonade and iced tea!"

Long before the guests arrived, I had decided to keep to my room. Anything, I thought, would be better than appearing with my feelings on my sleeve. I had prepared an excuse I hoped would placate Lizzie. I awaited her knock momentarily. But only the sounds of the party increasingly assaulted my door.

Shortly before eleven I crept down the back stairs and phoned Miss Jubb. She could hear the din in the background—the music, the strident laughter, the crashing of glass: "I'll be waiting in a carriage down the block."

I hurriedly began to pack an overnight bag, but now that I hoped to escape undetected there came a knock. I opened the door on Nance O'Neil.

She glided in, casting a glance all about as if to say, "What a charming room!"—then, turning, clasped her hands entreatingly: "It is Emma, isn't it? I've so wanted to meet you! I'm naughty to force myself on you this way, but Lisbeth told me the beautiful thing you said about artists—I knew you wouldn't turn me away!"

She was extraordinarily pretty—I could understand Lizzie's infatuation with her—that delicacy of face and figure did not run in the Borden family. But her effusiveness left me ill-at-ease. I thought at first that it was inspired by wine, but soon saw that it was only one of many poses she could summon up with instant ease. Her eyes fell on my traveling bag: "You're taking a trip? Lisbeth didn't say why you hadn't come down."

"Yes—I'm sorry I cannot spend time with you."

"But you're not leaving tonight surely!" she cried. "Won't you come downstairs for a while? Lisbeth would be so pleased—she's very proud of you!"

"No, I cannot. I am sorry she has sent you on a futile errand."

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"No, no, no! I came of my own free will! Oh, I'm too impulsive—it's my greatest fault—you do think me naughty!" Here she pouted charmingly.

"You have not been naughty," I replied, "only misused. You may tell my sister I said so."

She ceased magically to convey childlike sincerity—her bearing and expression shed an atmosphere of injured pride and reproachful forgiveness. I returned to my packing, not wanting to furnish her with further opportunities to display her art.

Five minutes later I stood at the door with my bag. I turned out the light and listened. Just as I was ready to slip out, I heard voices hurrying along the hall—then a sharp rapping—then the door was flung open. I had just time to shrink into the darkness behind it.

"She's not here," Lizzie said.

"Her suitcase was on the bed . . . " A shaft of light fell where it had been.

"It's gone—she's gone."

"Perhaps you can overtake her," Miss O'Neil murmured plaintively.

"You don't know her," Lizzie said in a hoarse voice. She closed the door but they did not move away. "I wonder what you said to precipitate her flight?"

"I?" Miss O'Neil fairly shrieked. "I said nothing! Her flight, if that's what it was, was already planned!"

"She would never have left at this time of night—she dreads scandal too much."

"Perhaps *you* are the one who doesn't know her," Miss O'Neil unwisely remarked.

"She is my sister!" Lizzie said harshly.

"But you've often said how different you are."

"We're two sides of the same coin."

"Don't let's stand here arguing," Miss O'Neil said placatingly. "She'll come back."

"Is that what you want?" Lizzie asked in a strange tone.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"It isn't what I want—I don't want her to come back."

"Well, then, neither do I!"

"I thought not," Lizzie said with satisfaction.

"I don't know what you're trying to prove," Miss O'Neil said in a disturbed voice. "I assure you I did nothing to cause her to leave—I

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came to her at your request . . . She said you had misused me," she ended with some heat. "I'm beginning to think she was right!"

Then Lizzie became placating: "I haven't misused you—Emma spoke out of jealousy—because I feel closer to you than I ever did to her—and because you understand me better."

"I don't like that kind of jealousy, Lizzie. You must go after her and explain. Why, what is the matter?"

"You called me *Lizzie*."

"Did I? Well, talking to your sister—hearing her—you know how I simply absorb things—"

"It is not my name. But perhaps there are those who make jokes about it in private," Lizzie said grimly.

Poor Miss O'Neil! "This is beside the point! We were talking about your sister!"

"I cannot go after Emma, I cannot bring her back. She left me long before tonight. I've lived with her door locked against me for twelve years. I'll hardly know she's gone."

"Don't talk about it, Lisbeth dear!"

"No, I won't burden you," said Lizzie. "And yet—I can't help feeling that somehow you took my side when you were with her—perhaps not even knowing it."

Miss O'Neil's voice, already at a distance, faded rapidly: "Come now! quickly! No, I won't listen to any more . . ."

After the scandal at Tyngsboro, she apparently did not. Lizzie was sadly in error if she imagined that her connection with drunkenness and misconduct would go unnoticed simply because it did not occur in Fall River but in a house she rented for a week somewhere else. Miss Jubb learned a great deal more than I would allow her to tell me—"If you are fascinated with her," I said snappishly, "you must not use me as an excuse." There need not even have been the bitter climactic quarrel that Miss Jubb got wind of. Those butterfly wings could not in any case have supported the burden of Lizzie Borden for long.

The doctor came. I said, "I want my body taken to Fall River—we have a family plot in Oak Grove cemetery."

"I've already promised to see to that, Miss Borden, and your other requests will be honored, too."

His choice of words roused my attention: "I have asked before?"—"Yes."—"And made other requests?"—"Yes, but when you

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weren't quite yourself perhaps."—"What did I say?"—"You asked to be buried the same way your sister was."—"That is correct, I do not want a ceremony."—"I mean, you asked to be buried at night."—"Did I?"—"You asked for Negro pallbearers only. . ."

I fell to thinking. "Well, I will go halfway with you," I said. "I don't mind the Negro pallbearers but I don't want the other part."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "Do you remember the day you changed rooms with Alice Russell? It was Saturday, after the police told us not to leave the house."

"You asked if someone in the house was suspected—you demanded to know who it was!"

"That night you asked Alice to sleep in your room. You took the one she'd been using. Father's and Mrs. Borden's. You put their lock and bolt between us. We never again had rooms opening freely into each other."

"Yes, I knew what you meant, even if poor Miss O'Neil did not."

"You have given me away, Emma."

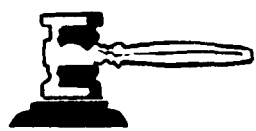
"If you changed your dress you must say so."

"I will never give in."

"I have no reason to wish to be buried at night!"

"Now that's more like it." The doctor's voice startled me. "Let's have less talk about dying and more about getting well. You have a long time to live!"

Well, that is not true. In the very course of nature I cannot live *much* longer. If I die quite soon, though—say within seven days of your death, or ten days, some such noticeable number—remember, I am seventy-seven!—it will be coincidence! I hope you will not try to make any more of it than that.



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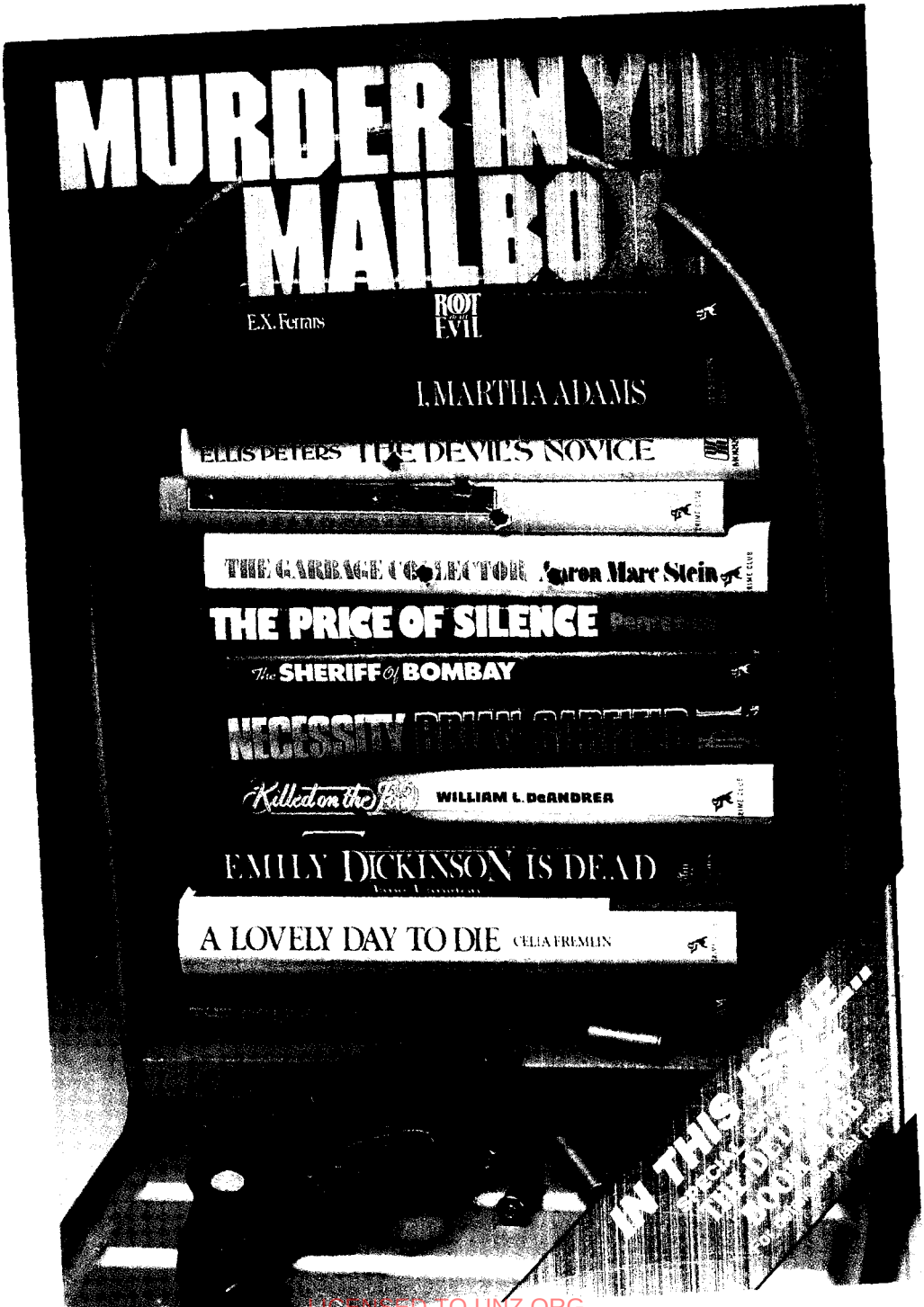

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